

Second Chance Series • Book One

# BEGINNINGS

paul green



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What would it be like to get a Second Chance at life?

Find out when an old, embittered hermit gets to go back and do it all over again. A wonderfully fun tale with just the right mixture of both romantic comedy and suspense, this fast-paced adventure fantasy will leave you satisfied yet yearning to know more about the delightful characters, an ancient nemesis, and their mysterious benefactor.

Come aboard for an amazing ride into the world of the Second Chance.

Part One (*First Trilogy*)

Book 1: BEGINNINGS

Book 2: AWAKENING

Book 3: PROPHET

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# Copyright Notice

Second Chance Series

Book One: BEGINNINGS

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For further information, contact [info@paulgreenauthor.com](mailto:info@paulgreenauthor.com)

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# **Second Chance Series**

## **Part One**

Book 1: BEGINNINGS

Book 2: AWAKENING

Book 3: PROPHET

## **Part Two**

Book 4: REVENANT

Book 5: PRODIGAL

Book 6: AVALON - Part 1

Book 6: AVALON - Part 2

## **Part Three**

Book 7: TRIBE

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## ***Beginning 2013***

Prophet Chronicles series

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## **Reader Recommendation**

*Due to the unique subject matter, this series will appeal to a very broad audience: teen to elderly, male and female alike.*

*Although some parts may be considered to be too intense for pre-teen or younger readers. Ages 13 and up recommended.*

*All characters in this work are fictitious. Any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.*

# **Acknowledgements**

Special thanks to all my reviewers. Your input has been invaluable.

Special thanks to Aunt Dot, for all your hard work in proofreading these novels. But as you know, this is all your fault for reading all those stories to me as a little tike.

Special thanks to Pat Guyton for taking the time to teach me cool stuff with Photoshop.

Thank you to my son Christopher for his help in designing the covers.

And extra special thanks to the One who gave me the desire to write.

# **Dedication**

*Dedicated to . . .*

Christopher

*Thank you for helping keep me young at heart.*

Second Chance Series • Book One

# BEGINNINGS

paul green



## *From the author ...*

I have done something a little unusual in the first book of this series. I have written it in first person; almost a 'noir' style.

Think back to those old, black-and-white private eye shows, where the main character would narrate his thoughts and experiences. That is what our lead character will be doing; as you'll be hearing his thoughts and his opinions, his feelings and emotions.

"Film noir" is a cinematic term used primarily to describe stylish Hollywood crime dramas, particularly those that emphasize cynical attitudes and relational motivations. Hollywood's classic film noir period is generally regarded as stretching from the early 1940s to the late 1950s.

While rarely done anymore, it was a wonderful way to see inside the mind of the main character. I debated long and hard over whether or not to present my very first novel in industry-standard, acceptable, typical, third-person narrative (*as I have done with the follow-up books in this series*). But I just wasn't able to capture the thoughts of the lead character in the way that I wanted to; and I felt that as an introduction, it was important to understand the way that he thinks.

Of course, you will soon learn - I do not always do things in a 'typical' fashion - I find it sometimes makes things more fun and interesting to go against the grain, and what is considered 'norm'.

I hope you'll agree.

-Paul

\*\*\* \*\*

Hi, I'm Ben. I'm the lead character in this book.

I am writing this on behalf of the author, because he was a little embarrassed about something. You see, this is my story. And as such, I'm a little biased about what is written between these covers.

First, let me start off by saying that if you are a critic, I would recommend that you pass. Trust me, you'll hate it. The author wrote this book exclusively for the reader. I don't say that because I have anything against critics. It's just that, this is his first book. And I mean **FIRST BOOK**. That means ... bad grammar - bad punctuation - bad form - bad style - bad (*you fill in the blank*). And then to make matters worse, he made the unholy decision to write my story in first person! Of course, everyone told him not to do it - especially for his first novel. But did he listen? NO!

Now, you can rest assured that our author doesn't attempt to do it again in the other books. Much. In fact, for the most part, things greatly improve in Books Two, Three and beyond. But for this very first one - if you can put that critic's hat in the closet and just enjoy my story - I think it will be worth your while. But like I said - I am a little biased.

Oh, and one last thing. If you're not much into fantasy, don't be alarmed by the opening couple of sections - especially when you are introduced to the 'bad guy' in "Disciple". It's just that - an introduction. Just hang in there and try to survive until you get to the fun and lighter section entitled *Déjà Vu*; for that is where you will be into the full swing of the overall tone and style of the rest of the book - and the series. Fantasy fans like me need not be concerned. :) Personally, I think it's kinda cool.

But I digress.

Join me on an amazing adventure, as we travel into the incredible world of the Second Chance . . .

~ Hermit ~



# Prologue

THE SPECTER PEERED DOWN at the old, rickety cabin deep in the canyon, astonished that someone would actually call this home. From atop his perch on the rock cleft, he noted there was no sign of anyone having come or gone in some time.

*Obviously the old hermit doesn't get out much.*

The cabin sat alongside a full-running creek, completely surrounded by a patch of trees and brush. A dwindling thread of smoke coming from the chimney indicated the fireplace inside had all but gone out.

As he made his way down towards his objective, he passed by a large fire pit, nearly a hundred yards from the dilapidated, old shack. Large, rusty metal containers littered the edge of the fire pit, indicating that this was where the hermit disposed of his unwanted assets.

Also nearby were a generator, several drums of fuel, a propane tank, and a well.

Sitting in the adjacent carport next to the cabin rested an old Jeep covered in dust, along with evidence of many spiders and their disreputable kin.

Being this close to the cabin, the specter could now hear voices coming from inside. Approaching the window, he could see a television playing softly in the corner. And if he wasn't mistaken, it was Jimmy Stewart in "It's a Wonderful Life".

*Somebody has a sense of humor. No, the irony is not lost on me. Very funny.*

He noticed his cowled reflection in the window.

*Don't want to frighten the gentleman.*

Lowering his hood, he rapped on the door three times and waited.

# Chapter 1

Ben Davison hated the world, and everyone in it. Nothing had prepared him for this. He had not deserved this. He never wanted this. He certainly had never imagined that this is how his life would end up. Life had definitely not turned out the way he thought it would.

He had always believed that he could do anything he put his mind to. After all, he was smart - he was creative - he was inventive - and he was a reasonably nice enough guy.

Ben was 60 years old, born and raised in California. He had a fine upbringing with good parents. There was nothing extraordinary about his appearance - he was of average height, average build, with brown hair and brown eyes. He wasn't movie-star handsome, nor was he Quasimodo ugly. He was your everyday, average guy.

Ben wasn't rich. But then, he never really cared much about that. He knew rich people, and saw how hard they worked. With maybe a maybe a couple of exceptions, most of them never seemed content. They were extremely driven and - as far as he could tell - pretty stressed out all the time. Nor did they seem to actually enjoy their wealth. Rather, they seemed to only live and dream about making more money.

Not Ben. He was prepared to make a modest living, plan on enough for retirement, and enjoy life to its fullest.

That was forty years ago. And somehow things had gone horribly wrong.

Sure, Ben enjoyed his work. He had a Ph.D. in Engineering Physics. He was an inventor, so to speak. And he was always designing new things that gave him that fulfilling sense of accomplishment whenever he completed a project. At least until Marketing got a hold of it and twisted it into something else entirely. But nevertheless, he had a fair amount of satisfaction with his career choice.

And as far as relationships go, he pretty much got along with everyone. Granted, he was something of an introvert at times, but that was just the way his brain was wired. While some people's idea of re-energizing themselves was getting together with friends and socializing and partying, it was Ben's way to get alone with a good book, away from other people.

Of course, when he was around close friends and family, he would come out of his shell and generally enjoyed joking around and having a good time

as much as the next person.

He didn't believe in taking life too seriously, and he often communicated through humor.

As far as marriage went, he seemed to do fine there as well. He always took care to try to demonstrate his appreciation for his wife of thirty years, Susan. He never forgot a birthday or anniversary, and was never demanding. It was a fine marriage.

True, they didn't talk a lot - weren't especially romantic - especially towards the end. In fact, over time, they seemed more like casual roommates than husband and wife. But, as the song from Fiddler on the Roof went, doing the laundry, fixing the house, and staying together - regardless of feelings - that's what true love was ... wasn't it?

But over time, Ben gathered into his introverted shell and began to avoid getting together with his friends and family. He began to come up with excuses why he was unable to attend birthday parties, Thanksgiving dinners and Christmas gatherings.

That was fifteen years ago.

When suddenly and out of the blue, Susan announced she could no longer live in a loveless marriage and that she was leaving.

No warnings. No signs. No counseling. No fair.

And just like that ... as their marriage had been cordial, so also was their parting of ways.

They sold the house and fairly split everything. Although she had eventually gone back to using her maiden name, neither had followed through on an actual divorce.

And Ben never saw or heard from her again.

Then things got worse. Despondent over his loss, he began to lose himself in his work to replace the relationships he had given up. By keeping his mind occupied, he was able to somewhat forget about the pain of his failed marriage and the loss of those he used to feel close to.

As Ben increased his workload, he began receiving more praise for his work, his ideas and his accomplishments. He realized he was able to produce much more for the company; and in return, he received accolades from his co-workers and extra bonuses for his labors. He was awarded Employee of the

Year for nine years in a row! And, of course, there was that lovely little two dollar chunk of Plexiglas statue that made it all seem worthwhile.

Eventually, the memories of his past wife and past relationships all but faded with the passing of years. Ben was consumed with his work. So much so, that he no longer took days off. He worked through holidays and quit taking vacations. Working over 120 hours per week, he became the pride of the company executives and even began to be considered for a VP position - Vice President of Engineering. Now that had a nice ring to it!

That was ten years ago.

That was when HE came on staff as his new assistant. Vincent was outgoing, energetic, charismatic and extremely ambitious. And Vincent stole his job.

Ben couldn't prove anything, but he knew what Vincent had done. Due to his introverted nature, Ben had begun allowing Vincent to represent him at various meetings, functions and even presentations.

*Stupid! Stupid! Stupid! I have no one to blame but myself! No, that's not true. I did nothing wrong. Vincent is the one to blame! And everyone at the company is to blame! They all knew I was the brains behind everything!*

Ben began to notice that all the praise he had been used to getting was now being redirected towards Vincent. Finally, he approached the Senior VP, gently reminding him that he was supposed to be up for promotion. To Ben's shock, that was his last day with the company.

Vincent had indeed stolen his job.

Granted, they gave him a reasonable severance package and promises of a glowing recommendation to any other who might be interested in him.

Ben knew he could get a new position anyplace. What with his expertise and experience and all ... he would be a shoo-in! He could write his own ticket to wherever his fancy might want to take him.

But he couldn't shake the smoldering bitterness that had been developing in him for many years, seeded back when Susan had left him.

And without realizing it, Ben now carried that burning acrimony with him to his job interviews. Angrily, he left many an interview in a huff, for their failure to recognize his great value and for being so blind to the great asset he would have been to their company.

And in time ... he began to realize that there was no one intelligent enough to recognize his great worth. Everyone seemed to be more concerned with their own petty little lives than to give credence to his unquestionable significance.

And so Ben decided he was done with all of them. He was done with company politics and scheming coworkers and forgetful friends and uncompassionate family members and seditious wives.

Ben found a piece of property - far away from civilization. *Civilized?* *Hah!* He bought a Jeep that would take him there and back again when absolutely necessary. And he would spend his remaining years secluded from the ridiculous antics of the human race.

And a recluse he became. Having left no forwarding address or any other means of locating him, Ben had not communicated with another living soul for the last ten years.

Even during his monthly trips into town, he refused to speak to anyone. They regarded him as the old hermit of the canyon. Many were curious about him - most were afraid of him. Children were reigned in if they came too close or tried to speak to him.

He had no mailbox and no telephone. He received no newspapers or any other form of contact from the outside world. His only friends were his books, his laptop, and his satellite TV with all of its movie channels, where he could escape into a forgotten world of what used to be, before it died along with his heart, so many years ago.

And Ben Davison never received a visitor to his pitiful, lonely little existence.

Until now.

## Chapter 2

I heard the knocking, but I thought I was dreaming. Opening my eyes, I tried focusing on the door, but my tired, old eyes weren't what they used to be. My glasses were over on the table by the reclining chair. I didn't want to get up, because if there really was a stranger out there, I didn't want to alert them that anybody was home.

*Of course, the loud sounds of fighting in Martini's bar on the TV might be a tip-off.*

So I just listened. After a couple minutes I thought I heard some shuffling outside. Then, it came again ... three pronounced knocks.

*A visitor!?! I've got a freakin' visitor!?!*

"Go away!" I yelled.

Then the visitor knocked again ... three very distinct knocks.

"I said go away! Leave me alone."

Silence. More silence. Then three more knocks.

Sighing, I got up and went to the door. My door didn't have an eyehole, as I never expected to need one. So I peeked out my side window to try to get a glimpse of this absurd person. Even in the light of the full moon, all I could make out was a dark brown cloak and long, white hair.

*Guess it's not the IRS.*

I snatched the .44 Magnum from the shelf by the door, and stuffed it in the front of my pants behind my belt. It would handle any intruder.

"Who is it? What do you want?"

"I am here to speak with you, Ben Davison."

The voice sounded old ... and patient.

"Who are you?" I repeated.

"Please allow me entrance. It is bitterly cold where I stand."

*Of course it's cold ... it's the middle of December, you idiot!*

"Sorry, but I don't receive visitors! I don't accept salesmen. I don't need religion, and I certainly don't welcome strangers."

"I am here to present you a proposition. Assuredly, you shall want to consider my words; for they offer great portent to your future ... and your past."

*Assuredly? Portent? Who talks like that? Who is this guy!?*

\*\*\* \*\*

Now Ben Davison was a recluse and a cranky old man. But he was also a curious man. And so Ben Davison opened the door of fate that wintry night, and in so doing, he forever changed the course of his life.

For the presence that stood there was not a man. At least not in the normal sense of the word. If his voice sounded old, his face looked ancient. Not in an elderly sense, for his face actually seemed younger than his. But his eyes ... it was as if ages had passed before them.

The moonlight lit up his silvery, long hair such that it appeared glowing white. He stood straight and tall, yet carried a long staff in his right hand. Whatever the staff was used for, Ben didn't think he needed it to walk, as the man's stance appeared confident and healthy.

He had a severe and intimidating presence about him. It was more than just his tall stature. It was more than his intense gaze, with eyes that looked straight through you.





There was something else about him that made Ben especially uneasy. He couldn't quite put his finger on it. He appeared as a man ... but yet he wasn't. Not quite human ... or perhaps a little more than human? There was a barely discernable shimmering that seemed to surround him. Ben wasn't sure if it was real or just a trick of the moonlight.

Ben couldn't make much else out of his features in the dark. So if for no other reason than curiosity, he invited the stranger inside.

Ben walked over and lit the nearest lamp so they wouldn't remain in darkness. The stranger entered and closed the door behind him.

\*\*\* \*\*

"Thank you, Ben Davison."

I ignored him and lit another lamp. Then another. I then shambled over and turned off the TV, just as Clarence was talking about earning his wings. As I turned around to face this disquieting stranger, I was surprised to see a slight smile on his face.

"Uh ... have a sit there on my couch. Sorry I can't offer you a chair. I don't get many visitors."

"No, I do not suppose you do."

I watched as the tall stranger walked the short distance to the couch and sat down, moving aside clothes and an empty TV dinner tray to make himself room. He began to poke at a pile of books on the coffee table with his staff. He noted they were all fiction of various genres. Fantasy, Science-Fiction, Mystery, Supernatural. Pure escapism.

As I took a better look at my uninvited guest, I noticed that his weathered skin was darker than mine. His eyes were a deep gray, that seemed both intense and amusing. Even while sitting, he maintained a powerful bearing that indicated this was not a man one should underestimate.

I rested my hand on my gun for security.

He wore a long, dark brown woolen cloak, that hid whatever he wore beneath. His hands were strong and calloused.

*Doesn't spend much time surfing the net, I gather.*

"Perhaps you could spare something to eat?" the stranger said. "For my journey has been long."

Without a word of reply, I went to the kitchen, and brought back some bread and cheese on a single platter, and a couple of beers. I brought no utensils, napkins or anything else a proper host might bring his guest. Opening my beer first, I then set the food and drink on the coffee table, next to where the stranger was still poking at my books.

"Thank you, Ben Davison. I am most appreciative of your kind hospitality."

"Yeah, whatever. Look, I'm tired. So why don't we just get on with this proposition of yours, before it gets much later. I imagine you have a long journey back tonight. After you leave."

"Why, most certainly. However, before I begin, I am still a bit cold. Would you mind if I tend to your fire? It seems to have gone out."

"Help yourself. I keep the firewood right there behind that..."

And in mid-sentence, I received my confirmation that this was indeed not a man. For the stranger simply turned his head towards the fireplace. As he did so, the dead fireplace suddenly roared back to life ... fresh logs and all!

I was wide-eyed. Trying to stay calm, I emptied my entire beer in three

gulps and just kept staring at the fire. My mind was used to running into aliens and ghosts and dragons and wizards and all sorts of fanciful and unnatural creatures from my beloved novels. But this was a little different - this time it was real.

"Uh ... I'm not in Kansas anymore, am I?"

"Oh, do not be startled by that ... it is merely a trick I picked up in my travels."

"Uh-huh. Sure. Okay." I didn't believe a word of it, and kept my hand rested on the .44 Magnum.

The stranger then produced a knife out of nowhere. As I slowly began to pull out my gun, the stranger then used the knife to slice off a piece of cheese and a large section of bread, which he then offered to me. I nervously shook my head. The stranger shrugged and began to eat. I didn't relax my grip on the gun.

"One more thing before I begin. I do not mean to be a nuisance, but could I perhaps have some water? I appreciate this fine ale you have provided, but I prefer to keep a clear head while I relate that which I have come to say."

I cautiously picked up the beer, and while keeping my hand on the gun, I slowly backed away towards the kitchen. Never once removing my eyes from the stranger, I poured a glass of water from the sink and brought it back. I marveled that my hands were still steady as I handed the glass to the stranger.

*Hope it's clean.*

"Thank you, most kindly. Now ... please sit down and I shall impart to you that which I have come so far to speak."

I popped open the second beer and drained it as fast as the first. Then I sat down and continued to stare at the stranger.

"Let me start by introducing myself. I am called Elias. And I have come to offer you a proposition that I think you shall find most interesting."

He had certainly gained my attention.

"Go on." I replied, after the stranger paused.

"I think you should know up front, Ben Davison, that I know a great deal about you. A great deal indeed."

\*\*\* \*\*

Now if Ben had reason to be shocked before, he was now completely stunned to hear this total stranger spend the next hour recounting Ben's entire life - from his birth to his exile here in the canyon.

## Chapter 3

Susan felt hopeless. She was trying to track down that foolish husband of hers. Or rather ex-husband; she never could get used to saying that. But he was nowhere to be found. He had left no forwarding address, and nobody seemed to know where he went. And she was no closer to finding out what happened to him, than she was at the beginning of her search.

Not that she needed to contact him. There was no emergency or anything pressing he needed to know about. It's just that ... well ... somebody needed to! Nobody else seemed to care. Her parents had no interest in giving him any more thought. And they used to like Ben!

Even his own mother didn't seem especially worried. "He'll show up when he's ready. I know my Ben."

The few friends they had left had long ago forgotten about him. He was never much of a socializer, so it wasn't difficult to understand their forgetfulness.

He had no children trying to track him down, for they were never able to have any children of their own. Not by choice ... it just didn't seem to be in the cards for them. And as painful as that had been during their younger years, it was even more painful now. For this is the time of life where Susan had planned and expected to be surrounded by grandchildren.

All she had left was her beloved cooking, which wasn't much of a consolation.

Susan was very lonely. She was also extremely irritated and frustrated. In truth, she still loved Ben. In fact, she had never stopped loving him. But everyone had kept telling her how hopeless he was. For Ben was a loner, and had never been a very affectionate person. He was very distant. He never let anybody in; herself included. But despite all of his faults, he was still a good man. Why was she the only one who ever thought so?

And finally, after years of badgering by her friends and her family, she decided that surely they must be right ... and so she left.

But it was only supposed to be temporary. All she wanted to do was wake him up as to how empty their marriage had become. She thought this drastic action would be the trigger that was needed to actually help revive and restore their relationship. She fully expected him to come after her; and so she waited.

But he never did.

Finally after several years passed, she couldn't take it anymore. Her friends and family had all been wrong. She never should've listened to them. She never should've left. Yes, she knew she could do better ... but she didn't want to do better. She wanted Ben. And she wanted him even with all of his faults and idiosyncrasies.

For they had been childhood sweethearts. And there never would be anyone else but Ben.

She had finally gotten up the nerve and took a cab out to the little condo where he had last been known to be living these past ten years. That condo alone had been very difficult to find. It was almost as if Ben had hidden the paper trail and didn't want to be found.

With her heart fluttering like a stupid little schoolgirl, she knocked on his door. And when the door opened, she was immediately heartbroken and crushed - for a beautiful blonde woman answered. And even worse, this woman was wearing a wedding ring!

"Yes? Can I help you?" she asked, when Susan remained speechless.

"Uh ... I'm sorry ... I think I have the wrong address."

"Oh, well ... who were you looking for?"

"Uh ... I was looking for Ben Davison."

"Oh! Ben Davison. He's the one my husband and I bought this place from, several years ago."

Hope bounded back into Susan's heart and her eyes lit up.

"Oh ... OH! Okay. That's great! Do you by any chance know how I might contact him? He's my ... ex-husband ... you see." Susan hated using that phrase in a sentence.

"Oh, certainly ... hold on a minute. Wait, I'm sorry ... where are my manners? Please come in."

"Oh no, that's okay. I can wait."

The woman smiled and walked inside, leaving the door open. She came back a few moments later with a piece of paper and handed it to Susan.

"This is the only address I have for Mr. Davison. I hope this helps."

"Thank you. Thank you very much!"

Susan headed back to the cab and gave the driver the new address.

Thirty minutes later the cab pulled up in front of Ben's new home. But Susan was not prepared for what she saw.

Once again a lump appeared in her throat, as she knew most likely she would not find Ben at the little motel after all this time. And she was right. He had stayed there only a few weeks until escrow had closed on the condo, and then left, with no forwarding address.

Next she visited his workplace, and that's when she learned he had lost his job of so many years.

*He loved that job!*

Susan successfully tracked down one of Ben's old co-workers, Kevin Marshall. She remembered Ben used to speak fondly of him.

"No, they canned him." Kevin explained. "Some new guy named Vincent took his place. It's too bad, too. He wasn't even in the same league as Ben. In fact, I'm pretty sure they were Ben's ideas all along, and Vincent just took the credit. Oh, did I say that out loud?"

"So, do you know where Ben went? Or where he is working, now?"

"No, I'm afraid not. Funny thing about that. H.R. was constantly asking me that a few years ago. Ben had a couple of residual checks that kept getting returned to us. They tried to track him down, but they never did find that goofball."

Finally, Susan had all but given up hope - which was very unlike her. But Ben had disappeared off the face of the earth.

One thing she knew for certain ... if she ever did catch up with him, she was going to ring his neck for putting her through all of this!



## Chapter 4

"Who are you!?" I asked, warily. "How do you know so much about me? Nobody knows half that stuff! And how did you know how to find me? Even the CIA shouldn't be able to track me down out here!"

"Let us just say I have done my homework." *So predictable. They always ask the same questions.*

Of course, that non-answer succeeded only in raising more questions, in my mind. Then one question in particular came to the forefront. "And WHY do you know so much about me? Why would you even CARE to know this much about me!? I'm a nobody!"

*Okay, that is different; they do not usually ask that until later.*

I began to get angry at this stranger, sitting there with that irritating half-smile on his face. Finally, Elias reached down for another helping of bread and cheese. Of course, my anger immediately fled when I realized the platter that had been completely empty just moments ago was now full again ... an entirely new loaf of bread and another big fresh block of cheese. I knew I didn't have any more in the kitchen. Elias had somehow conjured food out of thin air!

"Okay ... WHAT are you?"

"What am I? Why, I am but a man; even as you."

"Look, you're really starting to creep me out. Where did that extra food come from? That plate was completely empty just a minute ago!"

"Oh, that? It is merely a trick I picked up..."

"...on your travels ... yeah, I know."

Elias shrugged and took another bite.

"Listen ... just ... just be straight with me. I don't like to play games. What in the heck is going on!?"

"Very well, Ben Davison..."

"Just Ben, if you don't mind. Just Ben."

"Very well ... Ben. As I have said, the reason for my visit is this: I am here to offer you a great gift. A rare gift of unspeakable value. I am here to offer you ... a Second Chance."

"A second chance? A second chance at what?"

"Life, Ben. A Second Chance at life."

"Excuse me?"

"Ben Davis ... my apologies ... Ben ... you were chosen to be given this gift for a very important reason."

"And what reason is that?"

Suddenly, the early light of dawn outside went dark; it was as if someone had turned out a light. Ben hadn't really noticed, but Elias began nodding his head towards the window.

Finally Ben got a clue and rose up to take a look outside. The sunrise had been replaced by an eerie greenish glow, coming from the north. The nearest city was due north. Ben wondered what it meant.

"The reason I spoke of...", continued Elias, "...has to do with your latest project design."

"Design! Design? What design!? I haven't been working on any design for the last ten years! I haven't been doing ANYTHING for the last ten years!"

"That seems to be fairly accurate."

"You're not making any sense."

Then I noticed that a light breeze had begun to form; something which rarely happened that early in the morning. But what was even more strange, was that the breeze was northbound. Around here, the wind blew east or west, or sometimes from the north. But in my ten years of living in the canyon, the wind had never once come from the south ... towards that strange green glow in the north.

"When you left, Ben Davison, your last design was in the form of notes and scribblings only; discovered on a single floppy disk."

"Do you have any idea how weird it is hearing 'computerese' coming from your mouth? No offense, but you really don't look the techie type. And how did you learn all this, anyway? That place is always under heavy security!"

"Your data was retrieved." Elias continued, ignoring Ben's question.  
"And, it has since been implemented."

"Data!? What DATA!?" I had to think to myself for a moment, trying to remember. I had had so many ideas and inventions ... some good, some not so good. "Wait a minute ... I did have a couple of REALLY wacko ideas, way back when. They had to do with new energy sources. But I never got to work out any details before..."

"...before you were derailed. Deliberately."

"That's ... preposterous. Those ideas were nowhere CLOSE to being considered for development!"

"Your 'wacko' notes were actually quite ingenious, Ben Davison. And well thought out. They laid a very clear path as to how to proceed."

"But how could ... I mean, there wasn't anyone ... I told Kevin a little bit, but he hadn't the mind for stuff like that. Most of it went way over his head."

"It was not your friend Kevin who discovered your disk."

*Vincent!* I glared at Elias.

As if reading my thoughts, Elias replied "And ... he developed it into something for which it was never intended."

"Wait, wait, wait a minute. I hope you're not trying to tell me that that Vincent took my designs and actually generated a working MBH!!?"

"Yes."

"Stable?"

Elias nodded.

My mind was reeling with this revelation. "Wheeler had only hinted at the possibility... Hawking's calculations ... how could ... I mean ... the power required to generate a quantum mechanical black hole..."

"Are you familiar with a device known as the Hadron Collider?"

"Sure, the LHC - in Geneva. They finished it? They had only just started on it when I ... uh ... left."

"Only just."

"Okay, let me get this straight. Vincent ... my arch-nemesis..."

Elias raised an eyebrow.

"Sorry. Vincent, my back-stabbing protégé wannabe ... found my old notes on generating micro black holes as alternative energy sources. He then used a particle accelerator to initiate and maintain a stable MBH?"

"Vincent has never intended for its use as an energy resource."

"For what, then? The whole point was to be used as a power source."

*Elias patiently waited for Ben to work it out . . .*

"An energy source ... power source ... Vincent ... Vincent! A source of power for Vincent!! He wants that power for himself, doesn't he!? No way!! He wouldn't!!!"

"He already has."

"But ... he doesn't understand! My notes ... they weren't finished! How could he!? He doesn't know!"

Elias continued to wait, patiently.

"He doesn't know what would happen! He doesn't have the logic ... he's just a thief! He has no idea! Believe me, when I said those ideas were wacko, I meant they were seriously wacko!"

"Vincent knew exactly what he was doing." Elias finally replied.  
"Initially, that is."

"This is insane! He can't maintain that thing!" In my mind, I frantically began working through the mental calculations. "Elias, how big is it?"

"It has exceeded your original estimation of Planck-mass."

"That's impossible. Wait ... you know about Planck-mass!?" I asked incredulously.

Elias shrugged.

*Stay on track, moron!* I thought to myself.

"You know it's gonna outgrow..."

"Yes."

"But ... the whole area ... the whole region ... my God, the whole planet!  
We've got to get to Geneva!!"

"It is no longer in Geneva. Vincent was able to contain it in the early stages and has since relocated it."

"Elias, where is it?"

"North."

## Chapter 5

I was staring out of my window, while millions of mixed-up thoughts and feelings were racing through my head. I could only imagine what might be going on to the north. I noticed that the breeze outside was beginning to pick up speed, and I feared what it might mean. "So ... how much time do you think we have? I mean, until all this ... you know..."

"17 days, 3 hours and 22 minutes."

"I mean, just a ballpark guess..."

Elias smiled.

"Okay, so ... what I don't get is, why would Vincent even WANT to do this?"

"It was never his intention to destroy the world. Rather, it was his desire to control it. And he planned to do so through technology. This has been his goal for a great many years."

I just shook my head as I continued staring outside.

"So, Ben Davison, now you understand the necessity of why I have come. Thus, what I have come to offer you is this: the chance to go back and do things over again. A Second Chance to make things right."

Elias' words finally managed to snap me out of my thoughts and calculations, when I realized what he was suggesting. "Oh, I see. Well, I guess that makes sense. I'm supposed to save the world. I would have saved the world, but I was ... what? Derailed? Is that the word you used? And so because I was 'derailed', I can no longer save the world. And now you want to send me back in time to fix everything, so I can save the world ... after all. Do I have it right?"

"Something like that."

"IN A PIG'S EYE!!!"

For some odd reason, I then flew into a rage that had been building up inside of me for years. I began yelling about how my life had turned out. How I had never bothered anybody and was a good person and suddenly my wife 'ups and leaves me'! I continued on in an endless tirade, ranting and raving about how unfairly life had treated me. About how I could never have kids,

even though I would've made a great father! *Wow, where did that come from?*

And just when Elias thought I was about to calm down and take a breath, I started round two, going off about my ruined career and how hard I had worked and how I was supposed to be Vice President and how they threw me out instead and how nobody seemed to want to hire me and how my friends and family had all abandoned me and...

You get the picture.

Finally after a time, my rage began to subside. Never before in my life had I ever lost control like that. That was Susan's specialty.

Then as tears began creeping into my eyes and I thought I was going to lose it completely, I caught Elias looking at me. But it was not a look of shock or pity or disgust. Rather, it was a look of quiet stillness; and for some reason, it had an odd calming effect on me.

I knew Elias was sincere and that he was telling the truth. Or at least he thought he was. And you know what? As amazing as it seems, I believed him, too. Elias was for real. And so was his offer. This was no fantasy.

Of course, coming from me, with my overactive imagination and all, I wouldn't put too much stock in that, know what I mean?

I quietly walked over to the kitchen and grabbed myself another beer. I turned and looked at Elias, who simply watched the warm fire, graciously allowing me time to pull myself together. I thought about it for a moment, then put the beer back in the refrigerator. Walking to the sink, I splashed cold water on my face, and then poured myself a glass of water. Then I walked back over and sat down across from Elias. "Are you serious!?" I asked.

"I am."

"Time travel isn't possible! I mean, sure in fantasy-land, but in real life..."

Elias looked at me.

"Yes, I know the difference. Anyway, in real life it would take an infinite amount of energy to accelerate a slower-than-light object to the speed of light, which is required to travel backwards, and the mass buildup to achieve that would make it literally..."

Okay, so maybe there was a little fantasy going on in my mind.

Elias interrupted me. "Actually, you would not be traveling back in time

from a relativity, physics perspective ... exactly."

"Uh ... how then?"

"More from a ... metaphysics perspective; in a manner of speaking."

"Sorry, but I'm not a believer in metaphysics."

"Neither am I. I was merely using it as an analogy."

"Okay, so ... what's the analogy?"

"Memories."

"Sorry. Don't follow."

"Think of it this way. Granted, this may be difficult for you to comprehend, but you know how a person may sometimes find themselves lost in their thoughts of times past?"

"You're a funny guy."

Elias shrugged.

"You mean take a walk down memory lane?"

"A poetic way to put it, but yes. Now suppose for a moment, that you could actually relive a past memory; literally transferring yourself, simply by going back in your mind to a past memory or thought."

"But it's just a memory. Like a recording or a file in a database. It's not like it's some tangible reality that I could physically establish contact with."

"You are quite the scientist, I see."

Now I shrugged.

"The fact of the matter is, that is not entirely true."

"Which part?"

"What you just said. It is indeed possible to return to a past memory, and physically transfer yourself to that memory."

"Physically!? No way."

"Way."



I didn't know if I was more blown away by the fact of what Elias was suggesting ... or that he had just said 'way'.

"The gift I offer you, Ben Davison, to put it simply, is a total, complete and absolute transference of yourself back to a specific point in your memory."

"So it's all just in my mind, then? What's the point of that?"

"Oh, no, it is quite real. You are there, in every sense of the word. Whatever you do, whatever decisions you make, you shall have a literal, physical and tangible effect in the real world and the people around you."

"So you're saying I'm literally traveling back in time, via the power of my own mind?"

"Something like that, yes. Although the 'power' you speak of is granted to you only for a one-time, single trip. And it is one-way only."

"Not round trip?"

"No."

"So what happens to my body? Here? In the present?"

"It no longer exists. Well, of course, that entirely depends on what you do in the past. If you do everything exactly and precisely the same way all over again, you could very well end up right here having this same conversation with me. If not, well ... who knows?"

"Does that mean you would once again make me this same 'offer' of yours? Hypothetically speaking, of course. Because that's just kinda weird to think about; know what I mean?"

Elias just looked at me, blankly.

"Right. Okay. Sorry. So ... you're saying that I can literally go back in time and live my life over again?"

"Yes."

My mind was reeling with the ramifications! "And ... this entire present reality would cease to exist?"

Elias nodded.

"You can do this?"

"I can."

I didn't doubt him. You may have, but me? What can I say. What I was being offered was absolutely incredible! "How far back can I go?"

"You would be returning to when you first became a man."

"First became a man? What does that mean? Oh! You mean ... puberty!? I would be going back to when I was a teenager?"

"Yes."

"What about me? Would I still be me? Would I remember everything? Who I am? What I've done?"

"Yes."

*Yes!? I wasn't expecting that.* "You mean, I will become my original teenage self again, but still retain all of my memories of my entire life? Including right now?"

"Yes."

"That's extraordinary!"

"Yes, it is."

"I would be going back to high school! Doing it all over, again! Reliving ... everything all over, again!"

"Well, perhaps not everything."

"Meaning?"

"Having the advantage of hindsight, I would imagine there might be some things you may do ... differently."

"Yes, you're right! There's a LOT of things I would do differently! High school was terrible! Heck, yeah! I would do EVERYTHING differently!"  
*Man, all the stupid things I did growing up? There's no way I would repeat those mistakes again!!*

"What about the space-time continuum?" I continued.

"Come again?"

"Changing important events in the past. Or even unimportant events. You know ... the Butterfly Effect. If I went back to prehistoric times and accidentally stepped on a butterfly, it could change the entire future! There's this movie about a kid who goes back in time in a DeLorean and changes major events in his future timeline..."

"A DeLorean?"

"It's a car."

"Do you hear yourself, Ben?"

"Just answer me, okay?"

"It shall not happen."

"Why not?"

"As I have said before, I have done my homework."

"How could you possibly do homework on something I haven't even done yet? You don't know what I might do ... I could do something huge!"

"Such as?"

"I don't know ... what if I go back and ... uh ... assassinate Ronald Reagan before he becomes president and ends the Cold War? That might change a few things, don'tcha think?"

"Are you planning on assassinating Ronald Reagan?"

"Of course not. I liked Ronald Reagan."

Elias remained silent.

"So ... you don't think I will do anything that would change anything?"

"Oh, I think you most certainly will. But the changes you bring to pass shall not affect anything of global consequence until we reach our current time frame."

"You know this for certain?"

"I do."

"How do you know? Never mind ... I don't want to know. This is getting to be a bit much for me to wrap my head around. And believe me, I've got a

big head."

*That didn't come out the way I meant.*

I continued talking with Elias, asking question after question. He was very patient with me and answered most of my questions. Some, I could tell he wasn't about to answer.

Finally, I asked the question that had been gnawing at me from the beginning. "Okay, so what's the catch?"

Elias looked at me very seriously. "One thing and one thing only; you cannot use your retained knowledge for personal gain - be it power, fame or fortune."

"I wondered about that. So you're saying that I can't throw my weekly allowance into Microsoft stock?"

"It is as you say. You cannot use your own knowledge of future events for your own profit."

"And what would happen if I did? Would you kill me or something?"

"Hardly." Elias smiled. "But there would be consequences."

"What kind of consequences?"

"Well, for starters, you would no longer be permitted to retain any memory of your life beyond your age and time."

"Oh. I see."

I thought to myself for a time. Finally ... "That would be a substantial deterrent, I think."

Elias nodded in agreement.

"Besides, I never really did want to be rich. Not that I wouldn't mind winning the lottery or something; but it never was a goal of mine."

"Yes, Ben, I am well aware of that. That is, in fact, one of the reasons why you were chosen. For a man who would pursue such things would never be offered this priceless gift."

"I guess that makes sense. So ... when must I make this decision?"

"Tonight. Tomorrow. Next week. It is really up to you."

"I'd like to sleep on it."

"Certainly."

"Will you still be here?"

"If I am invited."

"Oh, yeah. Okay. Sure. Hold on." I retrieved some blankets from the closet and tossed them onto the couch. "You're invited."

"Thank you, Ben."

"Elias? Are you an angel?"

Elias smiled. "No, Ben, I am not an angel."

I hadn't expected that answer. Now the mystery deepened.

"As I have spoken, I am a man - just like you."

"You're not a man just like me."

Elias thought to himself for several moments.

"No, I suppose I am not exactly a man just like you. But I was, once. A long time ago."

## Chapter 6

By the time I crawled into bed, it was morning. I didn't think I would be able to sleep. The eerie, green darkness outside with the strange northerly breeze certainly contributed to keeping me awake. And that breeze had now turned into a slight, gusty wind.

I closed my eyes, imagining what it might be like to be back in high school again.

The next thing I knew, I heard a coffee pot gurgling in the kitchen. I looked at the clock on the dresser ... it was almost 3 o'clock in the afternoon!

I had slept for several hours. Had it all been a dream? It had to be. But then, why was the smell of coffee in the air? And ... was that ... was that ... bacon? It was! Man, did that smell good. I hadn't had bacon in ages! Susan was the cook. A great cook! Me? I burned water. And I certainly knew I didn't have any bacon in my kitchen.

Then I smiled. It hadn't been a dream. Elias was conjuring up food again. *Handy guy to have around!*

I got up and looked in the mirror, realizing that this could be the last time I would ever see this battered old face. By now, I had made my decision. The darkness outside still persisted and the wind gusts had grown stronger, with flying dust and tumbleweeds tossing about.

As I walked into the kitchen, Elias looked at me and nodded. "Sleep well?"

"Yeah, I guess so. I didn't think I would; not with all that racket outside."

"Did you not say you had wanted to sleep on it?"

"Well, yeah, but ... wait ... you didn't..."

Elias shrugged.

"You did. Well, you're just full of tricks, aren't you?" I said, not really caring anymore, one way or the other.

"Breakfast?"

"So you cook, too?"

"I have had time to practice."

"How much time?"

Elias raised an eyebrow and looked at me.

"How much time, Elias?" I repeated.

"A long time."

"How long?"

Elias smiled and thought to himself for a moment. "Well, I have made breakfast for many people. Most important meal of the day, you know! Some of those people have been very important - and well known."

I waited for him to continue.

"I have even made breakfast for one of your presidents."

"A president, now? Really? And which one would that be? Ronald Reagan?" I could believe he could send a man back in time, but I just couldn't quite buy the 'cooking for presidents' thing.

"I believe you referred to him as Honest Abe."

"Lincoln!? Abraham Lincoln!? That's impossible. I don't believe you."

Elias shrugged.

"If that were true, you would be ... like..."

"Oh, I am much older than that, Ben."

"You know what? I'm sorry I asked. Let's change subjects."

I wasn't ready for any more major surprises. I was still having a hard enough time coming to grips with the decision I had made during the night. Coupled with the growing fear about what was happening outside, I made my startling announcement.

"I have decided."

"I know."

He didn't seem startled.

"Okay ... well ... I've decided to take you up on your offer."

"That is a wise choice, Ben."

Since he didn't say anything else, I decided to sit and eat the breakfast that Elias had prepared for me. "I need to ask you something, Elias. You said I was derailed. What did you mean by that? What derailed me?"

"Not what, Ben ... who."

"Okay, then ... 'who' derailed me?"

"There are some things that I cannot answer you, Ben Davison, for you must learn those things on your own. The decisions you make in your new life must be of your own choosing. However, I will tell you this much - the one who steered you from your path, did so deliberately."

"I guess you alluded to that earlier. It's all kinda fuzzy; a lot to absorb, you know?"

Elias nodded.

I thought about it some more, before continuing. "I assume we're talking about Vincent again, right? So if he manipulated me, that means that he knew what I was doing, doesn't it? He knew about my project before he got there; he knew where I was going with it, and he knew what I was planning to do with it. Is that what you're telling me?"

"Nice job, Ben. And you did that all by yourself."

"We're talking about Vincent here. You sound like that twerp was ... more than a twerp!"

"Vincent is indeed more than what he seems. I will say no more about that, except this - you must not let him succeed, again."

"How do I stop him?"

"You must make the correct choices this time. He cannot succeed, but where you fail."

"Cryptic, much?"

Elias smiled.

I couldn't believe it.



*Vincent. That weasel!*

"But I must warn you." Elias said.

"Lemme guess. This is the part where you tell me I'll be risking my life?"

"Simply put, yes. It is in fact, a surety."

"Yeah, I figured as much." I said as I turned and looked out the window.  
"But it sure beats the alternative."

We finished our breakfast in silence. After we cleaned up, we sat down in the front room. "I don't think I'll miss this place."

"I cannot imagine why."

"Sarcasm doth not become thee, Elias."

"Actually, for one to speak proper King James English..."

"Stop! I don't want to hear it!" Then after a moment..."King James? Really!? That was like 1600 or something!"

Elias started to reply.

"Shush! Never mind ... I don't want to hear it."

Elias shrugged.

"Okay, Mr. Wizard ... so how does this work? Do you wave a magic wand or something?"

"If you are indeed ready, then all you need to do is fall asleep. When you wake, you shall awaken in your new life."

"Oh ... so ... no magic spells or incantations? No magic potions to drink?"

"I am neither a magician nor a sorcerer, Ben."

"Wizard! You didn't say wizard!"

Elias just looked at me.

"Fine. I honestly have no idea what you are. And frankly, I don't want to know. Just give me today to say goodbye to my old life, and I'll be ready for ... you know ... tonight ... when I go to bed."

"As you wish."

"A genie!"

Elias actually laughed that time. "No, Ben. Sorry, but no. Perhaps you should take a break from your books on occasion, hmmm?"

"Is it okay if I go outside for a bit? Is it safe? I mean, you don't think I could get..."

"For now."

"Thanks. I just need to be alone for awhile."

"I understand."

If it were possible, the darkness had become darker, and the bright green glow had become brighter. Dark clouds were circling above, blotting out the entire sky. The wind was now blowing steadily around 30-40 mph. It was actually a bit frightening. At least now I understood what was happening. People everywhere else must be in a near panic by now.

I actually began to feel bad for the civilization which I had scorned a decade ago. I never meant to harm anyone. I had only wanted to be left alone. Pangs of guilt had begun creeping in. This was all my fault!

*If only I hadn't recorded my thoughts on that floppy disk. If only I hadn't let Vincent run me out.*

But Vincent had to be stopped. At all costs. Even if it cost me my own life in the process. Which it probably would. But I figured I'd already lived a full life, so what the heck? At least there was hope that I could fix all this before it was too late. For I had a plan. I knew how I was going to put an end to all of this. And fortunately, I had a little bit of time on my side.

I spent the rest of the day alone, walking around my property, and thinking back on my life. Thinking about all the things I would do differently.

I especially wondered how I was going to handle Susan. I would need to figure out a way to avoid her somehow. I CERTAINLY wasn't going to connect up with her again; not after leaving me like she did. Fortunately, I would be going back early enough to prevent things from going too far.

Soon after the sun disappeared behind the canyon walls, I could smell food cooking from my kitchen. *Yup, definitely handy to have around.* I took one last look at my home for the past ten years, and went back inside.

After dinner, late in the evening, I finally broke my quiet reverie. "Will I ever see you again?"

"You already have."

"Nice response."

"I do my best."

"Good night, Elias."

"Good night, Ben. And my best to you on your journey."

"Thanks."

I thought to myself for another moment. "So ... I just go to sleep, huh? That's it?"

"Would you prefer I wave my magic wand? Would that help?"

I gave Elias a sheepish grin.

And as Elias smiled back, he picked up his staff and waved it once at me. Then I went to my room and fell into a deep sleep.

## Chapter 7

Waking up was hard. I had been sleeping so soundly; and I was so comfortable. I didn't want to open my eyes; all I wanted to do was go back to sleep. I hadn't slept this well in years!

As I opened my eyes, I squinted. The clock said 6:35. Odd ... my clock looked different, yet vaguely familiar somehow. I closed my eyes again; it was too early. Just a few more minutes, that's all. Just a little more...

*Wait ... no ... it can't be.*

My eyes popped open and confirmed what my mind refused to comprehend. For hanging from the ceiling ... was my old Pepsi-Cola lamp! The very same, ugly lamp I had clear back in ... *WHAT!!? NO ... FREAKIN' ... WAY!*

I sat up so fast my head started spinning. This was my room! My old room! There! All around the floor were scores of old pop bottles lined up all the way around my bedroom walls.

*I remember doing that! I remember doing that!! But I don't remember WHY I did that? That's just weird, Ben.*

And there on the window hung those ugly, green and gold plaid curtains. Man, those are hideous! And there on the closet door ... were all kinds of surfing pictures. I used to love surfing!

*I forgot all about that! Why did I stop, anyway?*

I jumped up out of bed. Whoa! Jumped? 'Flew' was more like it! I literally felt lighter than air! Then, I looked down at myself and saw ... the most skinniest legs I had ever seen in my life.

*NO ... FREAKIN' ... WAY!*

I remembered that inside my closet door hung a mirror. I literally bounded across the room and flung open the door. And saw myself ... as I looked over 40 years ago!

*NO ... FREAKIN' ... WAY!*

Which, of course, I couldn't stop repeating over and over again.

*It's happened! It's true! All of it! Everything Elias said was true! And here I am! Back in ... in ... gosh, when am I? What year is it? Wait ... let's see ... Elias said ... I looked around ... maybe ... 14? That must mean it's ... what ... 1973? Maybe?*

*THERE IS NO ... THIS ISN'T ... IT'S NOT ... NO FREAKIN' WAY!!!*

Obviously, I just couldn't get over the fact that I was here.

Suddenly, I heard a banging on the wall.

"Ben, shut up, will you!?! Go back to sleep!"

I froze. *Oh, no. Oh, no, no, no! It can't be.* But it had to be! After all, I'm back in 1973! Or thereabouts. And the voice that just hollered at me was ... *Oh, no! Why didn't I even think about that?* My brother David. My little brother David, who had died in that car accident so many years ago! *Oh, no ... I hadn't counted on this. I didn't think!!!*

I tried to control myself, but I couldn't as the tears began to flow.

*He's alive! David is alive!!*

I flung myself onto my bed and buried my face in my pillow; the only way I knew how to smother my sobbing.

After awhile, I was finally able to regain some semblance of control. David. In truth, I had never been that close with David, for our ages were several years apart and we had little in common. If anything, I had largely ignored David. It wasn't until the accident several years later that I deeply regretted ignoring my irritating little brother. With great sorrow, I had known that I had been a terrible big brother. And I would have given anything to be able to right that wrong.

*And now, here he is! Alive!*

I made the first vow of many to come - right then and there - that with this wondrous gift of a second chance - I would indeed right that wrong, beginning this very day - and become the big brother I should have been so long ago.

I didn't fully understand the rules of my newfound life. I didn't know if I could do anything to prevent David's untimely death; although I would certainly try. But what I did know was that David would now have a big brother that he could look up to, and who would look out for him. I had a lot of lost time to make up for.

I quietly opened my door and poked my head out. *Coast is clear.* No one was up yet, so I took a few cautious steps and gently opened the door to my little brother's room.

And there he was ... asleep ... just as I remembered him.

Suddenly the tears started to flow again and I had to hurriedly close the door. I went into the bathroom and splashed cold water on my face, and waited for everything to settle down. Then when I felt I was ready, I cautiously ventured back out to begin exploring my own house.

But then as I turned the corner, I was stunned to realize there was something else that I had not planned on.

My father. Who had died all of those years ago, but was now very much alive and well, sitting in his recliner chair reading the newspaper with a cup of coffee in hand.

*Dad is alive, too!*

Fortunately, my father didn't see me, for I had to hurry back to my room for another sob session. This time it took even longer for me to pull myself together.

I had loved my father; perhaps more than anyone else on earth. As many fathers often are, he had been my hero as a boy. And the thing I had noticed most when my father had died, was that no longer did I have someone to go and show my most recent accomplishment - or project or design.

There is something about a boy with his dad - "Hey, Dad! Look at me! Look what I can do!" That doesn't change when a boy grows up. And when I lost my father, I lost the only person in the world with whom I ever really cared to impress or show off to.

And now my dad was sitting not twenty feet away ... as if nothing had happened.

*Too much. This is too much. I don't know if I can do this.*

It took a long time. Perhaps suddenly having 14-year-old hormones again didn't help matters, either. But finally I was able to once again regain control of my emotions. Eventually, I sat up, went to my closet and grabbed my bathrobe. I opened my door ... and bravely entered into my new life.

~ **Disciple** ~

## Chapter 8

*I don't get Indians.*

Vincent was watching through a window as several Indian children played just outside their makeshift family habitats amidst pools of mud and trash. Vincent Atonescu had grown up here in Baja, just outside of San Vicente; and while San Vicente was not named after Vincent or anything, sometimes he felt that it should have been. His father, Victor Atonescu, was a wealthy landowner; which also meant that he 'owned' these Oaxacan Indians in one of the many slave labor camps in the region.

Vincent's family came here before he could walk. They were from Romania, and their white skin and blond hair was certainly in direct contrast to the local natives.

It was 1973, and although Vincent was now eighteen years old, he had never had any playmates. There were no other youth his age, other than the Indians - who were quite obviously beneath him. Though there had been times when he had fleeting thoughts of setting aside his family caste and heading outside to play, his fear of his father would quickly overshadow his childish impulses and keep him in his place - away from those subservient to him and his family.

Watching the Indians playing outside, Vincent was again reminded of how very different they were. The Oaxacan Indians were small people, the average adult height being under five feet. There were nearly 5,000 of them in this camp, residing in a city of cardboard and tin. They worked six days a week on local farmland surrounding the area, and they lived in abject squalor, in very unsanitary conditions, and were treated no better than animals by their task masters.

Yet here these Indian children were playing games in the muck, as if they didn't have a care in the world. They were laughing and obviously enjoying themselves, in as pitiful an existence as anyone could imagine.

*I don't get them at all.*

Of course, Vincent's family consisted solely of his father - who was rarely around - and himself. His mother had died at birth. His father never spoke of her, and Vincent didn't even know her name. He was raised by his Indian servants, who from his earliest memories, sought to do his bidding and fearfully obeyed his every command and whim.

His father had seen to it that no one particular slave was ever around



Vincent for more than a few weeks, as he didn't want Vincent developing unhealthy attachments with slaves. Even the women who raised him from an infant spent no more than a few days in his household, before being rotated out and replaced by another.

To Vincent's knowledge, the fear of his father was widespread among the other landowners in the entire Baja region and even parts of mainland Mexico. Thus the otherwise spoiled Vincent was always on his best behavior during his father's occasional visits. That is, if he even saw his father. The last time Victor visited San Vicente, nearly six months ago, he had not even taken the time to see his son.

Vincent was disappointed, but not surprised. He knew his father was a busy and important man, and didn't have time for traditional family reunions. While in truth he hated his father, Vincent also respected his power and his influence. He also believed that he was being groomed to someday assume his father's place in the world, inheriting a fortune and powerbase which kings could only dream of.

Already, Vincent walked the streets of San Vicente as absolute monarch of not only slaves, but local authorities and leaders as well. Wielding extraordinary power for an 18-year-old kid, Vincent was never required to pay for any service or favor. Everything in town was his, just for the asking.

Everywhere Vincent went, all were his amigos. The sheriff, the shop owners, the foremen at the labor camp, even the slaves themselves ... everyone treated him as if he was their best friend. Of course, they didn't have much of a choice.

All except, of course, Ramón.

Ramón was a small Indian boy, perhaps only fourteen years of age, who was responsible for the care and feeding of the family horses. As a stable boy, Ramón had frequent contact with his lord and master, Vincent Atonescu.

Now to Vincent's memory, Ramón was the only slave who had ever refused to capitulate to Vincent's station. After numerous beatings, Vincent soon realized Ramón would probably rather die than submit to Vincent's demands to be venerated by all.

And this intrigued Vincent.

It was then that Vincent did something highly unusual. As Ramón lay on the stable floor, bleeding from his latest beating, Vincent reached out his hand down to Ramón. Ramón glared up at Vincent's expressionless eyes with

intense loathing; yet Vincent simply stood there with his hand outstretched, waiting.

After several minutes of silence, Ramón also did something highly unusual. He accepted Vincent's hand, and allowed Vincent to help him to his feet.

Vincent then nodded for Ramón to follow him inside the ranch house, and Ramón reluctantly consented. Once inside, Vincent ordered several of his servants to see to Ramón's wounds.

The cordiality didn't last long, as anger once again seized Ramón. "What do you want from me!?" he spat.

"There is only one thing I want from you."

"What is that!?"

"I want the truth."

"The truth about what?"

"Anything I ask."

"Oh, I will tell you the truth, all right. I will tell you exactly what I think about..."

"If you tell me the truth of anything I ask, you will never again be beaten. Furthermore, you will receive compensation for your work in the stables, and you and your family may eat in my kitchen with my household servants."

It was the last part that got to him. To eat in the master's kitchen ... that was worth all the riches in the world to a skinny teenage boy like Ramón. Ramón quickly calmed himself and boldly looked at Vincent. "Ask away."

"Wise choice. Let's start with me. What do you think of me?"

Ramón was smart enough to know that Vincent wasn't looking for a tirade, but hard cold facts. So, with a great degree of control, Ramón gave an honest and calculated portrayal of what he thought of Vincent Atonescu.

A couple of times, Vincent raised his eyebrows. But for the most part, Vincent simply sat quietly and listened.

Finally, when Ramón finished what was surely to be his last spoken words on earth, Vincent smiled.

Ramón had never seen Vincent smile. It didn't look right on him, for some reason. But Vincent continued smiling as he stood up and clapped Ramón on the back. "Antonio! Fix up my friend Ramón, here, with whatever he wants from the kitchen. From now on, Ramón will be eating with the rest of you, inside."

Chuckling, Vincent turned and walked away.

Ramón's mouth remained open in shock as Vincent disappeared down the hall, still chuckling to himself.

## Chapter 9

It was several days before Ramón saw Vincent again. Once again, Vincent motioned Ramón into the house, and once again, he reluctantly went inside. Still suspicious of what Vincent planned to do to him, this time, Ramón sat down at the table across from him.

"I have some more questions for you." Vincent began.

"Ask away."

Thus began a fairly common routine between the two, which after a period of months evolved into a strange mixture of advisory meetings and something almost akin to a friendship. Vincent had never had an actual friend before. He was drawn to Ramón's intelligence, shrewdness, and quick wit. But he was mostly drawn to his honesty; for Ramón never held back. And now for the first time in his life, Vincent began to see the world as it really was, instead of through his own jaded eyes.

They discussed everything from religion to politics, business to sports, and girls.

Ramón also began telling Vincent about Monica, a girl he was friends with, even though she was older - nearly fifteen. Vincent had noticed her, also; for she was very pretty ... for an Indian. When Ramón began to look suspicious, Vincent laughed and assured him that he had no interest in Monica or any other Indian slave, for that matter. Ramón had her all to himself.

But that made Vincent begin thinking about his own circumstances. How was he supposed to meet girls stuck way out here on the ranch? He had never really thought much about them before now. Ramón seemed to know what Vincent was pondering and offered to accompany Vincent on a day trip to the nearest city, Ensenada.

Vincent had made many such trips around the Baja region and loved traveling on horseback. So while he jumped at the idea, he decided that Mexicali would make a more fruitful destination, albeit the round trip would take several days.

They planned to leave the next morning.

Of course, Ramón's mother could do nothing to stop this venture; for when the master called a slave into service, none dared question.

Early the next morning, the two headed west towards the San Pedro Mártir mountains that would take them toward the main highway into Mexicali.

After they left, they never heard the wail of Ramón's mother, believing she would never see her son again.

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They traveled at an easy pace for the entire day. After making significant progress, they arrived at the edge of the mountain range and decided to try and make it up into the pass before setting up camp. They finally reached the Santo Tomás Valley by nightfall and dismounted, having spoken little during their trip as Vincent had been lost in his thoughts for the entire journey.

"I'm starving," said Vincent. "Set up camp and prepare a meal while I look around. And keep watch for trouble." Ramón grunted and began unpacking the cooking gear. They were on a high ridge overlooking the valley, surrounded mostly by rocks and boulders.

Vincent was looking forward to their destination. He had plans. Big plans. And Mexicali was really nothing more than a stepping stone. For in truth, he wasn't going to Mexicali merely to meet girls, as Ramón had been led to believe. True, Vincent was curious about girls, but he wasn't about to waste time dwelling on the subject. Vincent's true passion was power. He had witnessed the same passion in his father, and it certainly had not skipped a generation. Vincent saw the effect that power had on other people. He experienced it firsthand himself, within his small monarchy back in San Vicente.

He liked it when people kowtowed to him. He liked feeling superior and having people fight to stay on his good side. He liked it when people jumped when he snapped his fingers. Vincent was enthralled with power ... the kind of power that his father possessed. More even. Much more.

But San Vicente was just a small town, in the middle of nowhere. And such power required that his base be situated someplace far more influential. Even Mexicali was too small for the ambitions of Vincent Atonescu.

In fact, there was nowhere in the entire region of Baja, or even mainland Mexico, that held his interest. Vincent knew that the real source of power and influence could be found in only one place: America.

Vincent had been working on his master plan for two years. And it involved his father. As Vincent believed that his father had been preparing

him to take over someday, Vincent had decided long ago - that day would come sooner, rather than later.

And it just so happened, that the great and venerable Victor Atonescu was currently in Mexicali on business.

## Chapter 10

While Vincent was walking around deep in his thoughts and schemes and plans for the future, he managed to stumble across a hidden cave entrance. Ordinarily he would have ignored it, but there was something about this place that began to reach out to him - to draw him in. It was a very strange feeling that he couldn't quite place.

He approached the cave entrance and peered in. He couldn't see anything, for it was too dark. But he could tell that the cave was larger and deeper than the entrance might at first suggest.

His 'Hello!' seemed to echo forever, indicating the enormity of the cavern inside. Pulling out his flashlight, he decided to explore. At first, the cave seemed to be a single large cavern, with a high ceiling that moved.

*Bats! But why are they still here? It's well past dusk. Strange.*

Across the far side of the cavern, he noticed another opening. He wasn't sure, but he thought he saw a brief glimpse of a light flicker coming from that opening. Fearlessly, he crossed the cavern to inspect the opening. To his surprise, the opening was surrounded by some form of crude lettering.

*Runes maybe? No language I'm aware of. Ancient by the looks of them. Hey, there it is again!*

Seeing the faint light flicker once more, piqued his curiosity. Wary that someone else might be in there with him, he turned off his flashlight and cautiously proceeded into the tunnel's opening in total darkness. *At least I've evened the odds.*

The opening had led into a long passageway that continued on for some time. Vincent hoped he wasn't traveling in circles. He kept his hand on the left wall as he walked. If he needed to backtrack, all he had to do was turn around and follow his right hand back along the same wall.

Finally, he saw the flickering light, once again up ahead. This time the light didn't disappear. From this distance, it looked like a single solitary candle.

As he approached the candle, he never once considered any danger. The thought that this might be some sort of trap never entered his mind. Vincent felt the light from the candle calling to him. And all he could think about was reaching that light. He now completely ignored his surroundings, even

removing his hand from the wall; for to Vincent, nothing else mattered.

The passageway ended and emptied him into an antechamber. Surrounding the large hallway were several more openings - and in each of the openings were more candles, with more runes surrounding each opening.

He noticed that one of the openings seemed to lead into a single room that was completely filled with lit candles.

Of course, he went to investigate.

As he stepped into the single large room, he saw that the walls were covered in candles and still more runes. In the middle of the room was a large fire pit. Atop the fire pit was a large animal roasting on a spit. And sitting right next to the fire pit - smiling up at him - was the oldest, most hideous-looking man that Vincent had ever seen in his life.

"Welcome, young one. Please sit and eat. I have prepared this feast in your honor!"

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"Huh!? What? How did ... what do you mean you prepared this for me, old man?"

"Why, I knew you were coming, young one. And now, here you are. Please. Sit down and eat."

Suspiciously, Vincent responded, "How did you know I was coming?"

"Foolish boy. You were noisier than a cow on your way here. I could hear you from the moment you first entered from the outside."

"Who are you? And how old are you, anyway? You look like you're pushing two hundred, easy!"

"Ah ... so quick to turn down my offer. Yet I see the hunger in your eyes as you gaze upon your repast. Do not be afraid. I shall not harm you."

Vincent snorted in contempt. "I'm not afraid of you, old man. Fine, I'm starving, anyway."

With that, Vincent plopped down opposite his strange and bizarre host and tore off a large piece of meat from ... whatever it was, atop the fire pit.

"Good. What is it?"



"Good, good. Yes, yes. A cave wolf, young one. There are many in this area. They think to make a meal out of me, but I always disappoint them. One day I am sure my hunter friends will have their reward."

"Wolf!? I've never eaten wolf meat before. Not bad. Never heard of a cave wolf before, either."

"Ah, but there are a great many things you do not yet have knowledge of."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Fallow."

"Excuse me?"

"I am named Fallow. By what are you named?"

"Uh ... Vincent. Vincent Atonescu. Maybe you've heard of me? Or my father, Victor Atonescu? We're both pretty well known around, even out here."

"Good, good. Yes, yes. What do you seek, Vincent of Atonescu?"

"What do I ... we weren't discussing anything like ... I was just telling you ... ."

Fallow exploded. "WHAT DO YOU SEEK, VINCENT OF ATONESCUE!?"

In a fierce and angry tone that terrified him to his core, the old man had completely and utterly unnerved Vincent. Vincent's mouth hung open as he dropped his dinner to the ground, while Fallow's eyes blazed with an intensity that seemed inhuman, staring right through Vincent.

He was speechless. With the exception of his hated father, nobody had ever before spoken to him like that. This old man had just caused fear in Vincent, something that rarely ever happened.

Yet even amidst his fear, Vincent still had backbone. "You could not possibly understand what I want, old man."

Fallow's countenance instantaneously reverted back from stormy to calm, just as he had initially appeared when Vincent had first arrived. Smiling, Fallow replied, "Oh, I think I know exactly what you seek, young one."

Vincent didn't dare reply.

"Allow me to illustrate, young one. If you were to turn around now, you would see one of my hunter friends approaching me ... from the way in which you first came."

Vincent nervously turned his head and to his shock, he saw the largest wolf he had ever seen! It was unnaturally monstrous; and standing on all fours, it was easily as tall as Vincent, himself. *That thing is as big as a horse! Bigger!!*

As their eyes met, the cave wolf crouched, and began to lunge towards them. Vincent lurched to his feet and simultaneously pulled out his trusted machete in one hand and a pistol in another. *Can't believe I left my shotgun at camp!*

Thinking only of himself, Vincent took cover behind the opening and prepared to kill himself a cave wolf.

Then he heard the chuckling. Glancing back at Fallow, he was shocked to see him slowly rise to his feet as if in no fear or hurry, laughing to himself.

Looking back again towards the wolf now bounding towards them, Vincent began unloading his pistol into the oncoming monster, with seemingly no effect.

Then, amazingly, Fallow stood right in the opening, directly in the path of the wolf.

In an instant, Vincent decided he would use the foolish old man's death to his advantage and take out the wolf with the machete, as soon as Fallow's body had fallen to the wolf's charge.

Then it happened. Fallow pointed at the wolf, and just as it reached them, it instantaneously fell dead in its tracks.

Just like that!

With his heart pounding in his chest, Vincent watched in shocked disbelief as Fallow calmly walked back to the fire pit and sat down.

After taking a moment to regain his composure, Vincent stared back at the dead wolf; then he too, returned to the fire pit and sat down.

"What do you seek, Vincent of Atonescu?" Fallow asked, again.

This time Vincent answered with newfound respect. Pointing at the cave wolf, he gave Fallow his answer. "That is what I seek. Power. And you have

it."

"Good, good. Yes, yes."

"I want what you have."

"Yes, you do. And I shall give it to you. For I have chosen you."

# Chapter 11

"*I hope he's dead.*" thought Ramón.

It had been several hours since Vincent went for his walk. It would be morning soon, and obviously something had happened to him. But as far as Ramón was concerned, whatever had happened to Vincent, he surely deserved it.

It was a long way back, and since Ramón wouldn't be able to get back to sleep, he decided to pack up and begin the long trek back to San Vicente. He finished saddling both horses, including Vincent's belongings which he was planning to keep for himself. Just as he started to mount his horse, he heard the familiar voice that made him cringe.

"Going somewhere?"

"Great. You didn't get yourself killed after all. That's great."

"And you sound so convincing, too."

"Where have you been all night?"

"Did you even bother to look for me?"

"You said, 'keep watch'. So I kept watch. You did not answer my question."

"I don't answer to you, Ramón. Need I remind you of that?" Vincent replied, threateningly.

"Fine, keep your secrets."

Ramón had grown even less intimidated by Vincent than he had ever been - and Vincent really admired that about him. *I still like that kid.* "You will find out soon enough. In the meantime, we've had a slight change of plans. We're staying here for a couple of days."

"What!? What for? We are not going to Mexicali? There is nothing out here! What is going on!?"

"I found something; something important. I wish to investigate further."

"What? What is it?"

"I will show you. But first we have some hunting to do."

"Great. You know we have only enough food to last us one more day? Now we get to live off of road runner and rattlesnake." Ramón said sarcastically. "I cannot wait. You know they both taste like chicken?"

Vincent ignored him as his mind was somewhere else. The sun had risen about an hour earlier, and he was scanning the surrounding area. "Let's start over there." Vincent said, pointing to a flat section of rocks about a hundred yards away.

"Fine, whatever."

When they reached the rocky outcrop, Vincent stopped and began looking around.

"What are you looking for?" Ramón asked.

"I need a still target; something to practice on."

Reaching for his gun, Ramón said "I have seen you shoot; you are not a bad shot. What do you need a still target for?"

"Quiet. And put it away, we won't need it."

"Fine, whatever."

Vincent remained still and in place, looking for something. After a couple of minutes he found what he was looking for. "There you are. Okay ... stay still for just a moment longer..."

Ramón looked over to where Vincent was staring, but all he could see was a small lizard crawling atop a rock to sun itself. He couldn't make anything else out that Vincent might be looking at.

Vincent continued staring for a moment. Then, he pointed in the direction of the lizard and mumbled something.

Satisfied, Vincent turned toward Ramón. "Get it."

"Get what?"

"The lizard. Bring it to me."

"Too many rocks. It will be gone before I get there. Besides it's not big enough to eat."

Vincent slowly turned to face Ramón, clearly impatient.

"Fine, whatever." he sighed.

As Ramón carefully approached the lizard, he was surprised at how bold it was, for it didn't try to escape.

Finally, as he reached it, he discovered why it didn't try to run away. The lizard was dead. "That is strange; I just saw it crawl up here." He scooped it up and brought it back to Vincent.

Vincent looked at it in his hand and asked, "Dead?"

"Yup. Yessir, boss, sir. You have done real good. We will feast tonight."

"Good. Let's try again."

"Huh?"

Vincent started looking around and saw another lizard off to the left. He stared at it for minute, then pointed.

"Get it."

"What about this one?" When Vincent didn't respond, Ramón tossed the first dead lizard at Vincent's feet and then went to fetch the other one - which he discovered was also dead.

Ramón suddenly got an uneasy feeling. "Uhm, this one is dead too."

"Good. Leave it. Let's try again."

"You think they ate something around here that killed them?"

Vincent just smiled. Ramón really didn't like that smile.

"Find me something else." Vincent ordered. "Something moving, this time. Something ... bigger."

Ramón turned over a few rocks and found a scorpion.

"Bigger." Vincent said.

Ramón turned over several more rocks and eventually found rock squirrel droppings near a burrow.

"That will do. Let's wait."

Ramón returned to Vincent's side and they waited for nearly an hour. Finally, the squirrel cautiously poked its head up out of its burrow and began to sniff around. Vincent stayed very still ... and concentrated. Then, slowly, without a word, he pointed at the squirrel.

To Ramón's horror, the squirrel instantly toppled over dead.

"You! You did that!?"

Satisfied, Vincent nodded. "Come with me; I want you to meet someone."

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They entered the cave area and Vincent continued to lead Ramón deep inside. Ramón was impressed; he had never seen caverns like these before. They finally reached Fallow's den, but he was nowhere to be found.

"So you are telling me this old witchdoctor did that to a wolf? He taught you how to do that!?"

Vincent nodded, inspecting the runes on the den wall.

"Well, that is just ... cool! As you Americans say."

"Romanian, not American."

"Whatever. You all look alike to me." he grinned, but Vincent ignored him. "Do you think he can teach me, too?" Ramón asked.

Vincent shrugged.

"This place is amazing!" Ramón exclaimed. "What do you think those runes mean? Can you make them out, at all?"

"No idea. But I know they're important. Did you pack my notepad, like I asked?"

"Right here." Ramón answered as he handed it to him.

"I want to copy these down." said Vincent. "They might be useful, somehow."

Ramón began exploring some of the other small cavern rooms nearby. He found them all to be empty, with the exception of a lit candle in each room. "Very strange." he muttered under his breath.

As he was backing out of the last room, he turned around and bumped into

what looked like a hideous walking zombie with long white, straggly hair. He let out a yelp and backed away, but the zombie reached out and grabbed him before he could get away.

"Hello, young one." the zombie spoke. That it could speak, frightened him even more. "I am named Fallow. I believe you to be named ... Ramón?"

"Fallow? You are that witchdoctor guy! I thought you were ... never mind. Hey, how old are you anyway!?"

"Found him, I see." said Vincent, as he walked up to join them.

"You can let go of me now!" Ramón demanded.

Fallow released his grip. "Come, I have found something for lunch. Join me." Then Fallow turned and headed towards his den.

"I know you said he was old...", said Ramón, "...but he looks like he already died! That is one scary looking witchdoctor!"

As they sat down to eat around the fire pit, Ramón grew increasingly uneasy as he caught Fallow staring at him several times. "Why do you keep looking at me like that!? What is your problem!?"

"I am sorry, young one. I mean no disrespect. But you are not what I was ... expecting."

"Expecting? You were expecting me?"

"Fallow asked me to bring you." said Vincent. "He really wanted to meet you."

"Why?"

"I have found much potential in your Mr. Vincent here." Fallow replied. "I simply wished to learn if you might prove to be a likely candidate as well."

"Candidate? Candidate for what? Can you teach me what you taught Vincent?"

"You also have interest in learning such dangerous things?"

"Oh, yeah!"

"Good, good. Very good. You will do nicely."

"I will do nicely ... what?"



Ignoring him, Fallow turned towards Vincent. "You have done as I asked."

"You mean, have I practiced what you taught me? Yeah, sure. I did it! It works!!"

"You have brought your young acquaintance with you. I will be requiring his assistance to continue with your training."

"Hey, I'll do whatever you need me to do."

"Good, good. Yes, yes. Shall we then proceed?"

Vincent and Ramón hung onto every word as Fallow began to explain to them more about power. He briefly reviewed for Ramón's sake about how he had taught Vincent to channel the power. Fallow marveled that Ramón seemed to grasp in minutes what it took Vincent the better part of the night, and already Ramón had begun zapping nearby bugs. Fallow smiled. "I have shown you how to channel power on a very small scale. But before I can teach you on a larger scale, you must first understand more about the nature of true power."

"What is the source of this true power?" Ramón asked.

Fallow seemed pleased at Ramón's question. "Why, you, of course."

"Ramón is the source of true power!?" Vincent asked, incredulously.

"No, no, not Ramón. You! Both of you! Each of you! Individually, you are each a source of true power." Fallow seemed more than a little perturbed at Vincent's question. Ramón noticed and smiled to himself. With a frown, Fallow continued. "Inside each of us lies a dormant fountain of power that one must learn to awaken. One must learn to not only awaken that power, but harness it as well. Then one may call upon true power at will. This fountain of power is virtually limitless. You must simply learn how to tap into it. But know this - the more you awaken this power, the more difficult it is to harness and bend to your will. Nevertheless, the more control you can exert over your power, the more powerful you will become."

"Limitless!?" Ramón asked.

"Yeah, I got that too." said Vincent. "How ... limitless?"

"Limitless." Fallow replied, with a malicious smile. "Unbounded. Immeasurable. Infinite. Inexhaustible."

"So this power that needs to be awakened..." Ramón noted, "...something must trigger it, right?"

Again surprised by Ramón's quick study, Fallow replied, "Yes indeed, young learner. Something must trigger its awakening. But it is something I am unsure either of you are ready for."

Like a dog salivating over a juicy piece of meat, Vincent could hardly contain himself. "Oh, I am ready! I'm ready now!"

"Are you, indeed?"

"Me, too!" said Ramón.

Fallow knew he now had them both where he wanted them. "Very well, young learners; I will tell you. To awaken this power within, you first must be willing to do whatever is required of you. To accomplish this, you must let go of all of your inhibitions, for I will be requiring you to do things that most might find ... 'distasteful'. Things which may go against your moral judgment."

"Uh ... what do morals have to do with any of this?" Ramón asked, suspiciously.

"Morals help define who you are." explained Fallow. "During your short lifetimes you have drawn lines that you would never think to cross; walls that would never be broken under any circumstances. At this very moment, each of you hold certain acts that you could never possibly conceive of doing. Things so horrible you could never bear the thought of. People close to you that you would never harm, perhaps?"

Fallow watched each of them closely.

Ramón immediately began to grow uncomfortable. "Of course!" he replied. Then he began thinking of people back home. Monica, especially, came to mind. He tried to imagine doing terrible evil things to her or harming her in some way. Finally, he admitted to Fallow that it was true. There were certain things he could never do. Lines he could never cross. Walls he would never break down.

"Good, good. Yes, yes, young Ramón. So you see what I say is true."

"Yes." Ramón sighed, sounding dejected; for he feared that he might have somehow just disqualified himself.

Fallow then turned his attention towards Vincent. "As for you, young

Vincent. Have you also discovered these barriers to awakening your true power?"

"Actually, no." Vincent replied, thoughtfully. "Not really, no. I've thought about it, and I can't think of a single thing that I wouldn't do."

"Really!?" Fallow asked. "Nothing at all? Have you considered all things? Murder perhaps? Would you be willing to kill another human?"

"Uh ... yeah, sure. Why not?"

Vincent was truly at a loss as to why this would be such a big deal.

And Fallow noticed. "Very interesting. How about someone close to you? A close relative, maybe? A brother or a sister? A parent, perhaps?"

"Well, actually, I had kinda planned on doing that already. That's why I was going to Mexicali. My father is there and I'm pretty much done with him. Time for me to take over the family business, if you know what I mean."

"What!!?" Ramón spun around towards Vincent. "I thought you were going to meet girls!"

Vincent snorted.

"Are you serious!?" Ramón exclaimed in horror. "Your own father!? You're going to kill your own father!?"

Looking directly at Fallow, Vincent coldly and callously proclaimed that there was nothing that he wouldn't be willing to do.

"Yes, yes, I think that is true of you, young Vincent." Fallow then continued his lesson. "Now let me explain why this is so important. It is behind these very walls, where the source of true power exists. Only by breaking down these walls, fully and completely, can you hope to awaken the power, and harness it to its full and limitless potential. But the power cannot be awakened as long as something is blocking it. That block must be destroyed."

Ramón's heart sank. Now he knew for sure he was disqualified. Vincent, however, would probably more than qualify.

"So how does one break down these walls?" Vincent asked, growing more and more excited. "How do I remove the block? Like Ramón said, what's the trigger?"

Fallow smiled again to himself. *Almost there.* "Something catastrophic must take place. Something so complete that no wall can possibly stand against it. Something that will cauterize any chance of something standing between you and your true power. You must have full and unrestricted access in order to be able to channel your true power. And in so doing, you will be invincible. You will be a god!"

Vincent's eyes practically glazed over at the thought of all that power, and was by now beginning to almost grow giddy at the prospect.

Ramón turned away. He couldn't bear to watch Vincent's insane lust for power strip away what little humanity he had left. Nor could he sit and watch the wicked glee in Fallow's eyes as he watched Vincent fall under his thrall.

"What must I do?" Vincent asked dreamily.

"Will you do anything I ask?"

"Anything."

"Then there is but one task for you to perform, Vincent of Atonescu. And if you succeed, you will awaken your true power. Are you ready?"

"Yes, please! What must I do?"

"You must kill Ramón."

"What!?" Vincent said.

**"What!!?"** Ramón exclaimed.

Somehow this command snapped Vincent out of his stupor.

Ramón couldn't believe what he had just heard. Frantically, he began searching for a quick exit out of there.

Vincent likewise was stunned at what he had just heard. *Kill Ramón? Not Ramón! He's the closest thing I have to a friend! Well, not a friend really; he is a slave after all. But I like the kid! He's honest with me. But the power ... I so want that power!!!*

As Vincent struggled with the decision, Fallow simply sat and watched the conflict.

Ramón stood up. "Uh, I do not know if you are joking or not. But I do not like it and I think I will be going, now." And Ramón quickly darted out of

Fallow's den.

Fallow didn't move. He quietly continued watching Vincent struggle with his decision.

Vincent knew that Ramón had left the room to begin his escape out of the caves. "Aren't you going to stop him!?" he yelled at Fallow. You can't just let him leave like that!"

"Why should I? This is your problem, not mine. I already have the power. You do not. Your power is walking away as we speak."

Vincent struggled as a multitude of thoughts and images flashed though his head ... of Ramón ... San Vicente ... his father ... the power ... Monica ... Ramón and Monica ... the power ...

The struggle lasted for several minutes. Finally, Vincent calmed down and was able to once again think clearly. He knew this should never have even been a struggle. He would do the right thing.

He now understood what was really important in his life. And what was not important. He had made his decision. He had had an epiphany.

"Goodbye, Fallow."

"Is it goodbye, then, young Vincent?"

"Yes, Fallow."

Surprisingly, Fallow was smiling at him. "Good, good. Yes, yes. You have made the right decision."

Vincent knew he had, as well. And so it was that he ran out to try and catch up with Ramón.

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As Ramón exited from the cave, it was late afternoon. He was overjoyed to step out into the light.

*Safe at last!*

Never again would he ever set foot in a cave. That was just way too...

He was stunned to hear Vincent yell after him.

*Not so safe, after all.*

As Vincent stumbled out into the light, Ramón was surprised to see that Vincent didn't have the glazed look anymore; he seemed his old self. Not that it was necessarily a good thing, either.

"What do you want? Here to kill me, Vincent?"

"Don't be stupid, Ramón; I'm finished with this place. Wait up, I'm out of breath."

Ramón didn't know what to think. Should he trust Vincent? "I don't trust you. You took too long to think about what Fallow said."

"Come on, Ramón. I was just under his influence. You felt it, too ... I know you did!"

Ramón admitted the truth of it. Fallow's promises of limitless power was indeed intoxicating.

"Listen, Ramón, that witchdoctor is insane; I don't want anything more to do with him."

"Okay, fine, whatever. If you mean it, then let's get out of here. And I will tell you something else, Vincent. I am NOT going to Mexicali to help you kill your father. That is SICK and I do not want anything to do with that. I am going home."

"Ramón, I was just saying things that he wanted to hear. If you don't want to go to Mexicali, then fine, we'll head back home together. I don't need to go there. But hey, can we at least stop over at Ensenada like you said, originally? I'd still like to meet some girls!"

Ramón couldn't help himself and smiled. "Fine, whatever. But we will make it a quick trip. I want to go home and see my girl."

Finally, Vincent managed to catch up to Ramón. Ramón noticed he was limping.

"I think I twisted my ankle back there, Ramón. Can you help me onto my horse?"

Ramón bent over with tightly closed hands to help Vincent up onto his horse. As he was looking down on the ground, he noticed some blood dripping. Then he saw where the blood was coming from ... his own shirt. And the machete that was sticking out of it. As Ramón's eyes closed, his last thoughts were of Monica.

*One down, one to go.* Back in the cave, Vincent was quickly making his way back towards Fallow's den. Killing Ramón had been easy enough. Fallow, however, could prove to be more difficult.

Vincent knew that while killing Ramón would awaken his true power, there was still more power to be had. And he could only get that from Fallow. The fact was, he had already made that decision when he first saw what Fallow did to the cave wolf. Now it was time to wrap things up.

As he entered Fallow's den, he was surprised to see Fallow sitting there calmly, as if expecting him. Fallow smiled at him as he entered. "Good, good. Yes, yes. You have made the right decision."

"You mean Ramón?"

"Yes, that, too."

"Huh?"

"As I told you when we first met. One day I am sure my hunter friends will have their reward."

"You weren't referring to the cave wolves, were you?"

Fallow smiled.

"You knew I would come back for you."

"Goodbye, then young Vincent."

"Goodbye, Fallow."

**~ Deja Vu ~**



# Chapter 12

It wasn't easy being a teenager ... again.

I had arrived during summer break. Which was great, because now I could spend all of my time with my family; especially my dad and my brother David. Mom was still alive from 'when' I came from, so I saw her all the time. Except now she looked so young! *Mom was never that young, was she?*

In 1973, the first time around, I pretty much tended to keep to myself. This time, however, the family noticed subtle changes in me and commented often.

I was always respectful, which immediately aroused their suspicion. At first they thought I had joined some cult or something. Mom was constantly saying, "There is something very different about you, Ben. Are you sure you're feeling okay?" The hand on the forehead, the whole bit.

Dad's response was "It's probably just a phase he's going through".

I did my chores regularly and responsibly. It's amazing how working a job for 40 years changes a person's viewpoint. Working ten hours a day vs. fifteen minutes of chores; life was a breeze!

I found myself saying "Dad" a lot.

"So, Dad, how was work today, Dad?"

"Why do you keep saying 'Dad' all the time?"

"I don't know, Dad. I guess I just think you're a great dad, Dad."

David was more than a little weirded out. "Get away from me, you freak of nature!"

"I just wanted to hang out. What's wrong with that?"

"That's all you ever want to do anymore! I liked you better before the aliens came and switched out your brain! Leave me alone or I'm telling Mom!"

Mom was by far the most suspicious. Sometimes I would catch her just staring at me. And she would engage me in conversations that could really make me uncomfortable.

"You know, sometimes I think I'm talking to an adult and not a teenager. How did you grow up so fast?" Or "One night I say good night to my son, the next day I'm saying good morning to my father. Dr. Spock never wrote about anything like this."

She was always saying stuff like that, and it really made me nervous. Keeping my true identity from her was definitely going to be a problem.

I tried my best to remember how to act like a teenager, but the fact of the matter was, it had been too long ago and I just couldn't quite get the hang of it.

Simple things, like getting up from a chair. It took me nearly three weeks to get that one right. At first, I would get up slowly, like I was still 60 years old, expecting my bones to creak on the way up. Heck, I'd been getting up slowly for 25 years! When Mom grilled me about it, I'd just say that I was tired, which eventually ended up with a visit to the doctor. Of course, I got a clean bill of health; but Mom would still try to pump me full of vitamins.

Then there was that trip to the mall, when Mom took David and I for some back-to-school clothes shopping. Now, letting her choose the clothes was the easy part, because I never really cared that much about clothes the last time around; at least not until I got older. But when this group of four, pretty, giggling teenage girls got in line behind us at the register ... well, now, that was different.

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"Hi, I'm Angela!"

14-year-old Ben would've been embarrassed, tongue-twisted and most likely say something stupid.

"Ladies. Getting ready for school, I see?"

"We sure are. Listen, we couldn't decide whether I should get this in red or pink. What do you think?"

She was probably doing it for the shock value, I'm not sure. But the two mini-skirts she held up had hardly any material on them at all.

"You know it's September, and it's going to start getting a bit chilly out; I suggest you consider something warmer."

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Now ... I was only being practical. I mean, the stuff she was holding up -

seriously, it looked like she would freeze to death in that!

They looked at me like a frog had just crawled out of my ears.

And Mom? While she verbally concurred with my assessment, on the way home I just barely talked my way out of a trip to a shrink.

Then there's coffee. I'll never forget that second morning. Without thinking, I walked into the kitchen, poured myself a cup of coffee, and sat down to read the paper.

"Benjamin Davison, what do you think you're doing?"

"Huh? What? Just looking at the paper..."

"First of all, since when did you ever have any interest in a newspaper other than the comics? And second, who said you were old enough to drink coffee?"

Then the horror struck me like a bullet train. No more coffee! Not for at least three more years!! I realized at that very moment ... I would most likely not survive life as a teenager.

Which brings up the whole food thing. When I was a kid, all I ever ate was cereal, hot dogs and pizza. But by age 60, my taste buds had matured, somewhat. Which as it turns out, is more a brain thing than a tongue thing; so it's all still there.

Do you have any idea how hard it is to order a hamburger or hot dog on the menu, instead of bacon-wrapped filet mignon with Béarnaise sauce? Or pizza, instead of Veal Parmigiana and Fettuccine Alfredo? No more Tiramisu. No more taco salads with jalapeños and cilantro. No more Margaritas or Pina Coladas. Go ahead and try eating Fruit Loops instead of a decent bowl of oatmeal with a grapefruit on the side, you know what I'm saying?

Of course, the biggest challenge yet, was just around the corner. School was starting in two weeks! I would be a sophomore in high school ... 10th grade. 10th grade!!! How was I supposed to pull off acting like a 10th grader around everyone at school? Especially my friends!

I found I was far less impetuous as a 60-year-old teen. I was wiser. I was much more cautious in everything I did and every decision I made.

Like the week before school started, when I was at registration picking out my semester schedule. I found myself choosing classes with a solid, college future in mind, instead of easy classes where I wouldn't have much

homework. Last time in high school, I was a bit of a flake. I never really got serious, academically, until I got into college. I always regretted that, because there were repercussions that affected me for the rest of my life. If only I could have gone to the colleges and universities of my choice. But in high school, I just couldn't seem to care much of anything beyond the weekend. My career would have taken off much sooner, I could have gotten nicer cars, I might have owned my first home instead of renting an apartment, and a million other things. Now with the advantage of hindsight, I knew there really was more to life than weekends.

Mom and Dad were both impressed with the choices I was making. Especially Dad.

"Son, I don't know what's happened this summer, but I just want you to know that I'm proud of you. You're becoming quite a responsible young man."

Now here's the weird thing about that. Hearing stuff like that from him was great. And I treasure the fact that our relationship had grown over the summer. But at the same time, it was going too fast! After all, I have already been a grownup for more than 40 years. Now that I have this incredible gift of a second chance at being young again, what am I doing? I'm acting like a grownup!

I realized right then and there that I have only one more shot at this. I would be out of high school in three years, and back on the road as an adult. So I decided that I needed to enjoy it while it lasted. Still make the responsible decisions - but try to remember that I'm also just a kid. At least for a little while.

## Chapter 13

It's Monday morning and the first day at school. And let me tell you ... I remember being nervous back then. But this time around? It's a whole new ballgame.

First of all, I've got to convince the kids and teachers at school that I'm in the 10th grade. So far I haven't done a very good job at it.

Second, I've got to convince my friends that I'm still me ... but the 'me' I was 45 years ago! That seems insurmountable.

*And I've gotta stop using words like 'insurmountable'!*

Lastly, there was the biggest problem of them all ... Susan.

My primary circle of friends in high school consisted of three other people. The four of us always hung out together at lunch, after school and on weekends - Stuart, Zagnut, and Susan.

Stuart was the nerd. He was into anything and everything geek. He had microscopes, music synthesizers, chemistry sets, and subscriptions to every un-cool magazine on the planet. He was in the school band and president of the chess club. I think he even read the entire Encyclopedia Britannica one summer. Seriously. He really did. He knew everything about everything and every subject known to man.

Zagnut was ... well, he was Zagnut. He had more energy than a hamster on caffeine. He usually dressed in the most ridiculous outfits that only circus clowns could appreciate. He was funny, outrageous, loyal, had flaming red hair, and was in love with Ginger on Gilligan's Island.

Me? I was the inventor. The dreamer. The big picture guy. Always thinking ahead, I was the creative force with the futuristic plans and high ideals.

And, I was the leader. I don't know how I ever became the leader, but every time there was a decision to make or indecision as to what to do as a group, everyone always turned to look at me. I was the Reed Richards of the Fantastic Four.

And then there was Susan.

Susan was very small and petite. She'll try and tell you that she's five feet

tall, but I've always known that she's really only 4'11". It used to be fun watching her argue with the nurse during routine physicals, back when we were married.

She had blue eyes and auburn hair that barely reached the top of her shoulders. Other than occasionally changing the style, she always kept it at that length throughout her life.

The four of us had practically grown up together. I still have memories of us playing together in Susan's back yard, all the way back to the 1st grade. It had never been 'Susan was the girl and we were the boys' - she had always and only been, just Susan - one of the gang.

That is, until we got to the 8th grade, and Susan started changing. I don't mean physically; that was neither here nor there. It was something else; something I couldn't quite put my finger on.

I once told Stuart and Zagnut there was something wrong with her - that she was starting to act strange; that she seemed different somehow. They thought I was crazy. Susan was Susan. They had no idea what I was talking about.

Stuart said, "It's probably just one of those girl puberty things. Don't worry about it. I don't notice anything different."

"Me, either." Zagnut said. "Except she's starting to get bumps!", and they both started cackling.

I remember thinking, "Okay, so maybe it was just me, but there was definitely something different about her. Something ... alien."

It wasn't until one day after school in the 9th grade, that I discovered what that 'something alien' was. The four of us always walked home from school together. Except for Tuesdays, which was band practice, so Stuart was gone. Zagnut was in after-school detention again. Seems he thought that pouring instant Jell-O into the boys' locker-room toilets was a good idea. So this time it was just me and Susan.

Susan was the smart one. The practical one. The sensible one.

And ... the spirited one. Especially if you got her dander up. She kinda reminded me of my brother David's pet Chihuahua. You know how loud, aggressive and 'in-your-face' they can sometimes get? I once saw that miniscule little dog chase a full grown German Shepherd all the way down the street!

Now, when I say she was the smart one, I don't simply mean she was extremely intelligent; which she was. Susan majored in Computer Programming in college, and back in 1975, that was REAL programming - binary and assembly language kinds of stuff.

But what I'm talking about is, Susan also knew HOW to use her brains. I may have a high IQ, but I have no common sense. I'm lucky to make it out of the house with my pants on. Susan, on the other hand, was wise. She seemed to have a sixth sense about things. She always knew what we were thinking and was always one step ahead of us. And the way she could figure stuff out? She could easily give Sherlock Holmes a run for his money. Not to mention that she was way more mature than the rest of us.

I remember that particular Tuesday afternoon like it was yesterday. Susan seemed oddly and unusually quiet. I was going on about my latest invention idea: sprinkler-system dispensers, where you simply drop in fertilizer or weed-killer pellets, and lawn care would be a thing of the past.

Usually she would jump in with her gracious but practical advice, such as: "Great idea, Ben. But couldn't that be harmful to pets?" Or "What if a 2-year-old ran to play in your death-sprinklers filled with poison?"

But this time she didn't say anything. She simply nodded in agreement to everything I was saying.

"Something wrong?" I said.

"I'm sorry?"

"I don't know ... you're awfully quiet today."

"Oh. I was just thinking."

"What about?"

Then she stopped walking, and stared at the ground. I looked down to see what she was looking at. *Hmmm ... nothing there.* When I looked back up, she was looking directly at me. Then, without any warning of any kind, Susan stepped in close and kissed me. On the mouth!!

I was stunned and just stood there with my mouth hanging open. Then she looked back down at the ground and sighed.

Susan looked sad; depressed, even.

Finally I was able to pull it together enough to say something. "Uh ... what

was that?"

"I kissed you. Don't state the obvious."

"Why?"

"I needed to know."

"Needed to know what?"

"Something."

"Something ... what? Come on, tell me!"

Susan just sighed and shook her head. "This is not good," she said. "Not good at all."

"What's not good?"

"Promise you won't laugh."

"Uh ... okay."

"Promise!"

"Okay, I promise!"

"I've been thinking about kissing. For a long time now."

"Why?"

"I don't know. I thought ... maybe I was just curious about kissing. About kissing boys. What would it be like, you know? Haven't you ever thought about kissing a girl?"

"Well, yeah, sure, I guess. Sometimes. Well ... maybe not sometimes ... maybe a couple times ... well ... maybe..."

Susan immediately put her finger to my mouth to shush me. I hated it when she did that.

"I've been thinking about it a lot lately," she continued.

"Okay, so ... I guess you had to try kissing somebody ... sometime ... I guess. That sorta makes sense. I think."

"That's the problem, Ben. I haven't been thinking about kissing somebody.



I've only been thinking about kissing you."

*After a long, awkward moment of silence ...*

"Oh."

"And so I thought that maybe if I kissed you, it would satisfy my curiosity about kissing boys in general, you know? And maybe I could stop thinking about it so much."

"Oh. So ... what's the problem, then?"

Susan looked back at me. "The problem is, Ben, I liked it."

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We didn't say anything else to each other the rest of the way home. It was the longest walk of my life. When I got home, I remember going straight to my room and plopping down on my bed to think.

I began thinking about all the good times I had with Susan growing up. She was always fun to be around. Zagnut always made me laugh. Stuart always had something fascinating to say. But Susan? Well, she was just the most fun. It took me awhile, but I think I finally began to understand that maybe I enjoyed her company the most. If I had a favorite, she was it.

And I couldn't stop thinking about "The Kiss". I had to admit, it really wasn't all that bad.

I wasn't sure what I should do. Should I tell someone? No, probably not. I mean, who would I tell? Certainly not Stuart or Zagnut. I had enough common sense to know that would be disastrous.

Dad and I had "The Talk" about three years ago. And I was comfortable enough with him, where if I ever had any 'technical' questions about this kind of stuff, I had no problem bringing it up.

But this was different.

The truth of the matter was, there was really only one person I could think of, who I would ever consider discussing something like this with - someone whom I fully trusted and whose opinions mattered to me the most. The problem is ... she's the one who kissed me!

The next morning I was completely dreading going to school. I had no idea what I was going to say to her. *Awkward, much?*

At lunch break we all met at our usual spot. Susan acted like nothing had happened. In fact, she even joked with me and smacked Zagnut for something stupid he said, which was pretty often, and everything seemed totally fine. It's like it never even happened! And I felt great. Everything and everybody was back to normal.

Almost.

For the next week, while the gang was "business as usual" and everybody was getting along just fine, I discovered to my dismay that now I had the problem.

That's right. The same, exact problem that Susan had. Maybe it's contagious or something. But I couldn't stop thinking about her. And I couldn't stop thinking about "The Kiss".

Then I started noticing unusual things about her. For example, I never noticed before, how she would sometimes pull her long bangs behind her ears. Or that she had eleven freckles on her nose. Or that she always licked the lid of her pudding cup after taking it off.

Weeks went by, and still I couldn't stop thinking about her. I found myself wondering if we would ever talk again about what happened.

One day at lunch, while everybody was laughing at Zagnut for getting his head stuck in the stairwell railing, Susan turned and caught me 'inspecting' her. She simply smiled at me for a moment, and then turned away.

Then it finally happened.

Three weeks later, Zagnut got the measles. It was Tuesday again, and Stuart had band practice. For the first time in nearly three months, it was just Susan and I walking home. Alone. Together.

She seemed her usual self, commenting about classes and everything else that had happened that day. I was having a hard time paying attention and was only nodding.

"Something wrong?" she asked.

"I'm sorry?"

"I don't know, you're awfully quiet today."

"Oh. I was just thinking."

"What about?"

I stopped and looked at her. She just stood there. Smiling. Knowingly.

"I've got a problem." I said.

"Oh?"

"Promise you won't laugh."

"Okay."

"Promise!"

"Okay, I promise!"

"I've been thinking about kissing. For a long time now."

"I see."

"And the problem is, I liked it."

# Chapter 14

Well, fast forward back to today. Once again it's the first day of school and I'm about to see my friends whom I haven't seen all summer. Correction: I'm about to see my friends whom I haven't seen in 45 years!

Except for Susan, of course, who eventually became my wife. And then left me.

In trying to remember what has happened since our 'second kiss', I can't quite recall if the gang has found out about us, yet. I do remember that we had decided that it would be best to keep things secret from Stuart and Zagnut, for awhile. Especially Zagnut! But I also remember that there were times when one or both of them accidentally stumbled across us on several 'close call' situations.

I do know they had found out about us by the end of 10th grade. Surprisingly, it had never bothered them in the least. And even though Zagnut had more than enough fun teasing us, we were still the Fantastic Four and the best of friends.

But it was especially important for me to remember, right now. Because if they didn't know about us, yet, it would make what I was about to do much easier and less painful. The secret little romance between Susan and I had to end. Now. Before it went any further. There was no way I was going to allow it to blossom into what it eventually turned into, and so I needed to nip it in the bud. I had no intention of letting Susan hurt me, again.

First period ... second period ... third period. So far, so good. I was pretty much able to keep to myself, and nobody seemed to notice that I was really a 60-year-old man in disguise.

Finally, lunch break.

And so it was, that armed with all of the knowledge, wisdom and experience that this keen, physics genius had available in his arsenal, with fear and trepidation, I headed out the door for my first encounter with the Fantastic Four.

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I left the hallway and was heading outside towards the large, open pavilion. It was all coming back to me. In the farthest corner of the area, about 75 yards away, stood the large oak tree under which the gang always had

lunch. It was our spot.

*Funny how much I'm starting to remember!*

As soon as I stepped outside, I stopped and took a look around. So far, during classes, I hadn't had much time to think about stuff. I was so busy trying to focus and keep up with everything being presented; it was a lot to absorb. But out here, I could stop and contemplate for a moment.

As I looked around, besides everything looking smaller, I also noticed for the first time how young everyone was. I didn't remember the kids in high school being this young. They were children!

Over by the soda machines, I saw a group of jocks. They always intimidated me. I never got into sports. I was naturally coordinated and quite able to keep up in P.E. with everybody, but I just couldn't ever really get into the sports programs. I remember trying out for track and baseball. I didn't have any problem making the teams, but I lost interest almost as soon as I started. I never quite understood why.

But the jocks ... especially the football players ... they tended to look down on the rest of us. I had always avoided them as much as possible; I didn't want them to catch me to make an example out of me. But looking at them now...

*They're just kids. Children! Just like the rest! Why was I so intimidated by them?*

As I was scanning the scene before me, I started recognizing all sorts of people. Kids. Teachers. Coaches. I started remembering their names, too. Over there, by the Teachers' Lounge entrance ... that was Mr. Daniels, the algebra teacher. And Mrs. White, the drama teacher!

I hated drama. I always froze when I got up in front of people; it just wasn't my thing.

And over there ... it's the janitor. Bob! Everybody liked good old janitor Bob.

Slowly, but surely, everybody's names were coming back to me. *This is pretty cool!* A lot of the kids, as well. There were the twins, Jill and Jackie. There was Chad, Shawn, Darla ... all of it was coming back. *Weird how the mind works!* And over by the cafeteria, I recognized more faces.

One by one, I was able to begin remembering the names of people I used to know. Then I saw another face.

*What? WHAT!?!? Wait! It can't be!*

Standing right at the edge of the distant parking lot stood a lone man - with his arms crossed and looking right at me.

*How is this possible!?* It was Elias! Was it? Too far away to be certain. But it had to be! The long white hair...

SSSMMMAAACCKKK!!!!!!

Suddenly, on a sunny California day, I found myself lying on the ground, and drowning.

*What in the...*

Sputtering and choking, my face stinging, my vision finally cleared enough to see what was going on. I had just gotten nailed with a monster water balloon. Shrieks of laughter behind me, the voice was unmistakable. Zagnut!

I was both furious and laughing at the same time. Turning around, Zagnut was on hands and knees, laughing so hard that he couldn't stand.

I stood up, soaking wet. And I realized in an instant how much I had missed that grinning idiot.

Then I quickly remembered and glanced back towards the parking lot. The lone man, if it was really Elias, was gone.

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"Sorry, man. I'm so sorry!" Zagnut cackled. "I didn't mean to get you RIGHT IN THE FACE!"

I shook my head smiling. My face still stung, but his laughter was infectious. "Good to see you, Zag. How's life been treating ... I mean ... uh ... how was your summer, dude?" I kept forgetting it's only been a couple of months since we last saw each other, at least from his perspective.

Zag's parents had a beach house that they shared with the rest of us - Susan's, Stuart's and my families. This year, each family took turns staying there two weeks at a time, so we really didn't see each other during the summer.

"Been a blast, man! Spent most my time boogie-boarding! Hey! I even took you up on our deal and learned to surf!"

"Our deal?"

"Yeah, don'tcha remember? You said that if I learned to surf, you'd give me your old board!"

"Oh, yeah ... yeah ... sure, of course."

"Hey, look, there's Stu and Susan!"

I looked towards where he was pointing and saw them both sitting under the oak tree. I could only see Stuart, as someone was standing in the way, blocking my view of Susan. All I could see was her elbow, but that was enough to suddenly give me a huge lump in my throat, to where I was starting to have a hard time swallowing. Now I wasn't so sure if I was ready for this.

Zagnut ran on ahead, while I slowed down. Finally, about twenty yards away, I stopped dead in my tracks. For as the person who was blocking my view walked away, I finally got my first glimpse of Susan.

It felt like I had been hit with a Mac truck.

The Susan I remembered was 45 years older. In our later years, neither of us had really taken care of ourselves - we sort of let ourselves go.

This Susan was ... beautiful! And so young!

*I'd forgotten. Oh, how I'd forgotten.*

Blinking back tears, I tried to get a hold of myself, but I was finding that it was becoming way too difficult.

*Dang hormones! Man, I've cried more in the last two months than I have in my entire life! What's the deal!!? Come on, man up, Davison!*

I did a sharp left turn and practically ran into the nearby boys' bathroom. After splashing cold water on my face, I felt I was ready to try it again.

And so it was, that somehow I managed to head back out and boldly starting walking up to the group.

"...I dunno, he was right next to me, a minute ago!" Zagnut was saying.

Obviously, I had been the topic of conversation.

"Stuart! What's happening, dude?" I said.

"There you are! Hey Ben, not much."

Then I turned towards Susan and said, "Hi."

She actually seemed startled when our eyes first met and she immediately looked away. Then after a moment, she looked back at me, forcing a smile. "You know, Ben, it's usually customary for one to remove one's clothes before they shower." she said with a teasing smile.

Zagnut snickered.

"Huh?"

Then Stuart started snickering.

"I don't get it."

Then as Zagnut lost it completely, I suddenly remembered that I was still soaked from head to foot from his water balloon massacre. "Oh! That. Yeah, Zag got me pretty good."

"Ya think!?" Stuart said.

"You're going to need a change of clothes, Ben." Susan said.

*Ever the practical one.*

"Nah!" Zagnut replied. "We've got almost an hour; he'll be dried off by then."

Then things got really weird. I found myself in this strange place of switching between the two Susans - young, teenage Susan and ex-wife Susan. It was more than a little confusing. All the different and various mannerisms and such ... it really started messing with my head. I realized, then, that I was going to have to be extra, extra careful around the little detective.

But even with Susan sitting right there, and dealing with my constant battle to not stare at her, somehow, somehow, we all managed to settle into our regular rhythm of banter; joking, laughing and just having a great time. Although, I mostly let them do all the talking. But after all these years, I couldn't believe how easy it was for me to slip right back in.

It was a huge boon for me, hearing everyone talk about what they did during the summer, which turned into a great orientation for me and really helped me to play catch up.

Susan kept telling all of us how much she had missed us during the summer. And, of course, the manly men that we were could only smile and



nod in agreement.

We were still catching up on everything when the bell rang. As we began to split up to head towards classes, Susan came over to me. "Walk me to class?"

"Sure."

*Gulp.*

"It looks like you're mostly dried off, now. Are you going to be okay?"

"Oh, yeah, I'm fine."

"Listen, I can't walk home with you guys after school, because Mom is picking me up. I'm taking Home Economics this year and we have to go shopping for some supplies."

"Home Economics!? Why!?"

"Come again?"

"I mean, yeah, sure! You need to learn to ... cook and stuff. Uh ... yeah, I guess that's a good thing to ... you know ... learn ... how to..." *Geez, already I'm slipping up!*

"You're acting mighty peculiar, Mr. Benjamin Davison."

"Sorry, I was just ... uh ... never mind."

"Anyway, what I really wanted to say was, do you think that maybe you might be able to come over after dinner, just for a few minutes? There is something that I need to ... 'discuss' with you, if you know what I mean."

Susan was smiling at me mischievously .

*Man, those eyes are blue!*

"Oh ... uh ... tonight ... uh ... yeah ... okay, sure. Actually there is something that I needed to talk to you about, also."

"Oh, really? What is it?"

"Uh ... it can wait until tonight."

"Okay, see you tonight then, Ben. I've really missed you, you know!"

## Chapter 15

Alone in my room, I was going absolutely nuts.

*This is crazy! I'm supposed to be breaking up with her tonight! I've GOT to break up with her! We can't repeat the same mistakes that we made before! We were miserable together! It's gotta end now! But all I can think about is how pretty she is! I mean, she is really ... hot!*

*SEE!?! There I go again! This is ridiculous! It's a mistake! I gotta do this!*

*Why is this so freakin' difficult!? I just walk up to her and say, "Listen, about last year. I don't think it was such a good idea. I think maybe we should just stay friends, okay?"*

*It's that easy! Two simple sentences. Just get them out of your mouth and everything will be fine after that.*

*Come on, man, pull yourself together!*

Then I pictured Susan's face again as I saw her at school, and I couldn't remember what I was supposed to say. Again.

*Oh, man! I'm 60 years old and I'm acting like a lovesick fool all over again! This is great. Just great.*

*Okay, yeah, fine. I'll admit it. She's cute. And I like her. And I used to love her! But she broke my heart. When she left, I died that day! I can't go through that again.*

*I've gotta do it. Somehow I've just got to tell her like it is and be done with it. It's better if things end now. There is no other option.*

*She may think things are great now, but I know what the future holds. I think I can fix a lot of things this time around, but this just isn't one of them. I gotta remember the mission. I've gotta remember why I came back in the first place. If I don't stop Vincent, he'll destroy the whole planet!*

*Focus! Focus! Focus! I need to focus!! Remember the mission...*

And then I remembered Elias. I was sure it was him! It had to be! How he had managed to be here, I had no idea. Elias was from my future. He couldn't also be back here. And he looked exactly the same! Well, whatever the explanation was, seeing Elias helped jolt my senses back to reality and what

needed to be done.

Tonight, I would end things with Susan, and finally be able to settle in on what I needed to be doing.

Saving the world.

\*\*\* \*\*

After dinner, I told my mom I was heading over to Susan's house for a little while.

"Susan, hmmm?"

"Uh, yeah! Susan, remember? Susan ... like in 'Stuart, Zagnut and Susan? We've-been-best-friends-since-kindergarten Susan'? What's wrong with that?"

"Nothing is wrong with that, Ben; I never said there was. Why are you being so defensive?"

Mom was actually smiling at me. She knew! About me and Susan! *How long has she known?*

I was in a really bad mood and not looking forward to what I was about to do. I didn't say anything else and just stomped out of the kitchen.

"Don't be late! You have school in the morning!"

*Great. I'm 60 years old and now I get to be mothered all over again.*

A seriously bad mood.

Susan lived two miles away, and it was a very, very long walk. I swear I could hear funeral music along the way. I kept seeing her hurt expression as I imagined the breakup scene. Then I'd switch back to the future and remember how I felt when she left me.

I really didn't like the fact that I kept switching back and forth between the two Susan's. This was all very complicated. And it was time to un-complicate things.

When I finally reached her house, I rang the doorbell. I heard her yell inside, "I got it!"

As she opened the door, my heart once again skipped a beat. I just couldn't get over how beautiful she looked! She was wearing my favorite blue top,

which ... with her auburn hair and deep blue eyes ... oh, don't get me started.

She smiled and looked down, as if flattered at the effect she was having on me. "Come on, let's go out back." she offered.

"Okay."

We sat at the picnic table in her backyard, next to the pool. The moon was bright enough where I could make out all the details of her huge yard, and I started remembering all the times I had spent growing up here. The birthday parties, Easter-egg hunts, swimming in the summertime, even the annual haunted house.

*How her dad loved that haunted house! I'll never forget how much it devastated us when he succumbed to cancer, nearly twenty years ago. He was like a second father to me. I wonder if I'll ever be able to see him again after tonight?*

"Wow, you're really deep in thought. Whatcha thinking about?"

"Oh ... uh ... just growing up, I guess. A lot of memories."

"Yes, there really are! I remember one especially good memory last Christmas Eve. Remember? Right here, after everyone else had gone to sleep?"

*Oh, gosh, no! Don't do that! Please don't...* "Yeah, I remember."

"Ben, what's wrong?"

"Who said anything was wrong?"

"I can always tell."

I sighed. It was time. I have to do it. It was now or never. I needed to get this over with. "Susan, I have something that I need to tell you."

"Yes, Ben. I know."

"You know what?"

"I'm sorry - I didn't mean to interrupt."

"You always do that! You always think you know what I'm thinking or what I'm going to say!"

"Ben, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to..."

"Well, you don't always know what I'm thinking. And you don't always know what I'm going to say."

"Yes, Ben, you are right, of course. I'm sorry."

I was becoming indignant. Then once again I began to forget who I was speaking to, switching back and forth between little, teenage Susan and my ex-wife Susan.

"You might be surprised to know," I continued, "...that sometimes I might just know things that you don't know, okay?! I've seen things! And I've been places. And there are things happening in the world that you wouldn't understand! And it hurt so much! You hurt me so much!!"

"Ben!" Susan gasped. "Ben! I ... I ... I'm so sorry!"

"Why did you do it, Susan? How could you do that to me!?"

"Ben! I never, ever wanted to! This whole summer..."

"I loved you! I loved you so much! How could you!?"

"Ben, I loved you too! I still do!"

Maybe it was hormones, I don't know; but I couldn't think straight anymore. I couldn't distinguish between past and future. I certainly didn't expect this to happen. And the things I was saying to Susan ...

*I've got to get a grip. This is not Susan my wife. She doesn't deserve this. I need to leave ... got to get out of here...*

I started to rise ...

"Ben, I mean it! I still love you! I always have and I always will! I'm so sorry I left. I never should've hurt you like that. Please, believe me!"

"You don't even know what you're saying! You don't even know what we're talking about!!"

"Ben, of course I know what you are talking about! I was married to you for thirty years!"

## ~ Reckoning ~

# Chapter 16

Mexicali wasn't what he expected. Looking at his surroundings, Victor Atonescu was taking stock of things. He had spent the latter years of his life as a renegade and a fugitive. Originally using assumed names, it had been decades since he had been exiled. And in a far-off, underdeveloped country, Victor had grown comfortable with using his own name, again.

A traitor to his own people, Victor had been a dictator in his homeland of Romania, secretly aligned with Nazi Germany. In fact, it was Hitler himself who had established Victor as a puppet king.

Victor had been directly responsible for the killing of 300,000 Jews and 10,000 Roma in Romania and the territories.

After the fall of the Nazi regime, he was captured and found guilty of betraying the Romanian people for the benefits of Nazi Germany, economic and political subjugation of Romania to Germany, cooperation with the Iron Guard, murder of his political opponents, mass murder of civilians and crimes against peace, and for participation in the German invasion of the USSR.

History recorded his death by execution on June 1, 1946 in Jilava Prison, Romania. But as was also the case with several of his colleagues, Nazi influence was still powerful enough to ensure his secret release after a very public trial.

Now an old man, he still knew how to instill fear and intimidate those around him. Violence continued to follow his footsteps wherever he went.

Not content to retire with the large fortune he had amassed, Victor still craved power. Already the most feared and powerful presence in both Baja and southern Mexico, Victor wanted more. For Victor understood that with enough power, he had nothing to fear from any government, that might inevitably track him down.

Victor wanted to rule not only Mexico, but all of South America as well. And at the rate he was climbing to power, it was not only possible, it was inevitable.

Having established two bases in southern Mexico and a western base in Baja, Victor was now scouting locations for a northern base, just south of Mexicali.

Trusting no one, Victor knew he still needed lieutenants to manage all four bases. He had given command of his two southern bases to Eva and

Selena, his two wives; for he didn't trust command to power-hungry men. Women generally seemed to remain satisfied, given enough wealth and control over the men beneath them.

The only exception was that of his two sons, who he believed could be kept reasonably loyal and in check.

Of course, he was proven wrong when his oldest son Josef was murdered; by his own mother Eva. From all reports, Josef had grown tired of waiting for his turn at dominion in the north, where Victor was now - once again confirming his theory that women were more suited to the task. He was certain that Vincent's mother, Selena, would also be as ruthless, if necessity dictated.

The delay was caused by the fact that his other son, Vincent, was still too young and inexperienced to assume control in the west. But a couple more years to mature should suffice. Thus it was required for Victor to keep an eye on the western region until Vincent was ready.

Victor wanted to build on the outskirts of the city. As in his other locations, he required a 360° view, with a minimum of thirty miles of open plain in all directions. Assault could come by air as well as by land.

As he was standing alone on the outskirts of the city and mulling over the landscape, he never heard the footsteps of his visitor's arrival.

"Hello, father."

Victor froze. Cursing himself for being caught by surprise, he knew that only his wits could save him. Victor understood in an instant that there could be but one reason for Vincent to be so far from home. "Vincent. I am pleased you have come." he said, without turning around.

"Are you now, father?"

"Do you know why I am here, son?"

"Why don't you tell me." Vincent replied, as he slowly continued his cautious approach towards his father.

"Have you ever thought about visiting America?" said Victor.

This stopped Vincent in his tracks. He was, indeed, very interested in America. He didn't say anything, but quietly waited for his father to continue.

Aware that his son had stopped moving, Victor smiled, knowing his ploy



was paying off. "I was never content with giving you the west, you know. I knew you were destined for greater things."

"You know, I have to agree with you on that."

"The city before us is situated directly upon the U.S. border, as you well know. Having access to this city..."

"...is to have access to both countries." Vincent finished.

Pleased with his son's quickness, Victor continued. "It is in this place, that I have destined you to rule."

"Really? Is that so. You have destined me?"

"Of course. I have the power to grant you anything you desire. That is, should I find you worthy."

"I see. And what must I do to prove my worthiness to you, father?"

"You must demonstrate to me, to my satisfaction, that you are able to maintain a full mastery of both command and control, should I choose to give it to you."

By appealing to Vincent's innate lust for power, Victor knew that he had won; for he had observed his son's hunger often, back in San Vicente.

"Well now. That is certainly an interesting proposition." Vincent replied. "May I ask you a personal question, father?"

Turning around to face his son, Victor nodded. "Certainly. What would you know?"

"Who was my mother?"

Caught off guard by the sudden and surprising change of topics, Victor was momentarily at a loss for words. "Your mother. Well, son. Your mother ... her name is ... Selena."

"Is? You mean she is still alive?"

"Yes, Vincent. Selena is still alive."

"You have told me my mother was dead. Why have you lied to me? Why have I never met her?"

"Selena is ... complicated."

Without response, Vincent quietly waited for Victor to continue.

"She ... Selena, that is ... she was never really interested in a domestic life. She had other ambitions."

"So ... what is it, exactly ... that my mother valued more than her own child?"

Victor was growing uncomfortable with this line of questioning. "Selena is in Cozumel. Those are her lands."

"Power. My mother values power over her own flesh and blood."

"Vincent..."

"No, no, father, it's okay. I understand."

"Your mother does love you, Vincent. In her own way."

"Do you, father? Do you love me?"

Victor hesitated.

"I am sorry, father; that question was not meant to be a stumper."

"No, no, Vincent. Of course I love you. I am just not accustomed to ... you know ... man to man ... it is not easy for us to acknowledge..."

"It is okay, father. I understand."

"Good. Good." Victor thought to himself for a moment. "Well, son, now that you have arrived, why don't you take a good look around. Before us lies the gateway to two worlds."

Vincent came and now stood alongside his father.

"Everything you see, my son, can be yours. As I said before, I have the power to give all of this to you. Take it all in. From horizon to horizon. Name it, and it is yours."

"Really, father? Do you mean it?"

Victor smiled. Vincent was more ready than he had at first realized. Josef was a very difficult child, and not very intelligent. Vincent, on the other hand, was another matter, entirely. He actually liked the boy. He thought that even Selena would be proud of what he was becoming. "Yes, son. I mean it. It is my gift to you."

"Have you found me worthy, father?"

"Yes, my son; I believe I have. Look upon all the lands that surround us. Take a good, long look. Just point to what you want, and it will be yours."

Victor turned towards his son, and was taken aback. For Vincent was pointing directly at him.

"Thank you, father." was the last thing he heard, as Ion Victor Atonescu fell dead at his son's feet.

## Chapter 17

It didn't take long for Vincent to seize control of his father's assets and power base. When he reached Mexico City, 'Aunt Eva' was more than happy to submit to her young nephew. Of course, having her entire personal guard taken out by the small army that Vincent brought with him from his base in Baja, didn't hurt, either.

With two regions under his control, it was time to visit Mom.

He arrived in Cozumel with enough troops to conquer Mexico City itself, should he desire it. But Vincent wasn't interested in ruling Mexico.

As he marched into the large compound, he wasn't the least bit surprised to see his mother running towards him.

"My son! My son! You have been returned to me! Oh, how I've missed you so!"

He couldn't help but notice how beautiful she was. She was from Spain, and had long, dark brown hair and brown eyes.

Though Vincent looked more like his Romanian father, he could still definitely see the family resemblance.

Stepping over her body, he thought it fitting to at least give her a decent burial.

Unlike his father, Vincent didn't fear placing men in control. They had all seen what he could do. They had all seen what he had just done to his own mother. Over-ambition really wasn't a concern.

Once everything was set up and in place in Cozumel, it was time to set his sights back on Mexicali ... and what lay beyond. Vincent had already decided that he would build his northern base right where he had left his father's body. It seemed poetic, somehow.

He arrived in Mexicali with two teams - one to build his base just south of the city, the other to help him establish his presence in the U.S.

Of course, taking over a nation the size of the United States wasn't going to be accomplished with his little Mexican militia. In fact, Vincent didn't believe that America could be conquered by an army of any size. They were, in fact, too independent and too accustomed to their freedom. They had

already proven more than once, that they would rather die than gave any of that up. No, taking control of the leading world power could only be done through one means: technology.

Unfortunately, Mexico was not exactly a global source for technology. His only option was to infiltrate various organizations within the U.S. And this would take some time.

A long time.

Thus, his U.S. infiltration team was comprised of the best tech minds he could find in Mexico. Which was okay, but he had also begun building a global recruitment campaign in both the tech and scientific sectors.

He estimated that something of this magnitude could take up to 25 years, give or take. Fortunately, he was young. But the consolation was that once he had firmly established his control of the U.S., the rest of the world should fall quickly, as he would already have the necessary technology in place. Thus Vincent prepared to set himself in for the long haul.

And he knew just where to begin. When he first obtained access to all of his father's files, he was delighted to learn of close ties between his father and the greatest tech company in the world: IBM.

Learning all his father's secrets from his Nazi past didn't surprise him or interest him in the least. But upon learning of a secret division of IBM, a German subsidiary called Dehomag with direct ties to his father and the Third Reich, Vincent became ecstatic.

While the official IBM/Nazi connection had been severed by the end of the war, Vincent had obtained records of all personnel down through the years, including his father's current contacts within IBM. Apparently, IBM had a good reputation for staff retention, and family members were pretty much guaranteed a position within the company.

Dehomag and its descendants were alive and well in America. And many were still loyal to the Atonescu family name.

## ~ Revelations ~

## Chapter 18

*Ever wake up and can't quite tell if you're still dreaming or not? That's what it was like, lying face down on the pool deck in Susan's back yard. Right in front of my eyes was this little rollie bug getting ready to climb up my . . .*

"Ben, can you hear me? Ben?"

"Leave him alone, Sue." I heard a man's voice say. "Give him a minute to catch his breath."

"But look at him, Dad! He's bleeding!"

"He probably has a concussion, Bill." noted Susan's mother, worriedly. "We should call an ambulance!"

I finally started to raise my head to look around. I was so groggy! I didn't know where I was or what I was doing, here. And everything was spinning.

"Yeah, I think you're right. Go call the operator for the number. We'll stay here and keep an eye on him."

"He's waking up, Dad!"

"Take it easy son, try not to move too fast. Do you think you can sit up?"

I nodded.

It's weird. As I looked up and saw Susan's father helping me to sit up, for a minute I thought I was nine years old again and had bumped my head on that lower tree branch, just like last time. It wasn't until I saw my long legs that I figured out I wasn't nine anymore.

Just as everything was starting to come into focus again, I started feeling dizzy again. Then I got sick.

"Whoa! Look out!" Susan's dad yelled.

I blacked out again.

\*\*\* \*\*

The next time I woke up, I was in a hospital bed. My parents were both there.

"Mom? Dad? Where am I?"

"You're in the emergency room, dear." answered my mom.

"What's going on? What happened?"

"Well, from what I gather, son..." explained my dad, "...while you were over at Susan's, you slipped and fell, hitting your head on the picnic table. The doctor says you're okay. You have a mild concussion, but as soon as you feel strong enough to get up, you can go home."

I reached up and felt my throbbing forehead.

"Got a nice bump there. That's gonna win you some major sympathy points from your mother. I'd say three days, at least."

"I wanna see!" shouted David as he squeezed in between my parents.

"Hey, hey, we told you to stay in the waiting room!" my father scolded.

"Nah, it's okay." I said. "I'm feeling better. Come on, David, you can check it out."

It was still throbbing, but at least I didn't feel dizzy anymore. I started to sit up.

I remembered everything. "Susan ... she..."

"I'm right here, Ben." she said as she walked in. Susan looked scared and frightened. I could tell that she had been crying.

"Really gave us a scare, son." said Susan's father, coming up behind her.

"I ... I'm all right, now. I think."

Then the nurse walked in, followed by the doctor.

"Mr. Davison, how are we feeling?" the doctor asked.

"Actually, I'm doing okay. Or, I was..." I said, as I spotted the vampire nurse coming towards me with her death needle.

"We just want to take a quick blood sample before we release you." explained the doctor, as he began inspecting the bump on my forehead. "I'll go ahead and have a wheel chair brought around."

"I don't think I need a wheel chair. I'm fine, really."

"Hospital policy, Mr. Davison."



The nurse finished her gruesome task, then left the room.

"Dear, why don't you go finish the paperwork and sign us out." said my dad. "I'll go bring the car around. I had to park almost a block away."

"We'll stay with him until you get back." Susan's father offered.

"Thanks, Bill. We really appreciate this. David, you come with me." my mom said.

"Oh, sure. Anytime." replied Susan's dad. "You've got a good kid there."

After my parents and David left, Susan asked her father if she could talk to me alone for a moment.

"Sure, doll, I'll just be in the waiting room."

After he left, Susan turned back towards me. "Don't you EVER do anything like that again!"

"What!? WHAT!?"

"Ben, you scared me to death!" she said as she wrapped her arms around me, pulling me close.

"Head. Head! Watch the head!!"

"Ooh ... ooh ... sorry! Did I hurt you?"

I just looked at her.

"Sorry, poor choice of words."

I just kept looking at her.

"Well ... say something!" she said.

"Is it ... really you?"

"Yes, Ben, it's really me."

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We didn't get to finish our conversation, as just then the nurse showed up with the wheelchair; David riding shotgun. Susan stayed by my side until I was finally loaded into the car. Then she kissed me on the cheek and promised that we would talk more, tomorrow. Mom was smiling as she caught the

whole thing.

When we got home, the nurse had left a phone message, saying everything checked out fine and that it was safe for me to sleep.

I crawled into bed. And even though there were a million questions spinning in my head, I fell asleep in a matter of minutes.

\*\*\* \*\*

I woke up at the crack of dawn, and immediately got dressed for school. I had an important meeting with someone, and I wasn't going to miss it!

When I got to the kitchen, Mom looked at me as if I had grown antlers. "Where do you think you're going?"

"Uh ... school!"

"I don't think so!"

"What? Mom, I feel fine!"

"I don't care! The doctor said you needed to rest today, so that is EXACTLY what you are going to do, young man! Sit down; I made you your favorite breakfast."

"Told you!" Dad said from the table, without looking up from his newspaper.

"But Mom!"

"Sit!"

I couldn't believe it. A grown man being bullied around by a woman a foot shorter than me!

*Although now that I think about it ...*

I looked at Dad, hoping for some support, but he just shook his head as if to say, "You lost this battle before you even got here."

The day dragged on, forever. I needed to talk to Susan! It dragged ... and it dragged ... and it dragged...

Finally, at half past three, the doorbell rang.

"Hi, Mrs. Davison. I was hoping that I could see Ben. Is he awake?"

"Awake! Awake! I'm awake!!" I yelled from my prison cell room for the last nine hours.

"I think he'd like some company", my mom laughed. "Why don't you head on back to his room."

"Thank you, Mrs. Davison."

I was sitting on the edge of my bed when she walked in. She closed the door and sat down next to me.

"Finally! I've been going stir crazy in here!"

"How's your head?"

"Oh, it's fine. Did I really throw up in front of your dad?"

Susan laughed. "It figures that's the first thing you would bring up."

"So, what happened?"

"You fainted."

"I fainted? Really!? Then, that's how I hit my head..."

"Uh huh."

"Very weird." I said, shaking my head.

"I'm glad you're okay."

Then neither of us said anything for several minutes. I didn't even know where to begin. Finally, I spoke up. "Susan, I..."

"No, Ben, let me start."

"Okay. You start."

"First things, first. I want you to know that I had meant what I said."

"About..."

"About how I had never meant to hurt you. And I'm sorry that I left you. I made a horrible, terrible wrong choice and I've regretted it ever since."

"I..."

"Let me finish. Ben, I was a fool! I let other people tell me what I should and shouldn't do, instead of listening to my heart. I kept hoping that you would come after me, but you never did. I kept thinking, 'Today's the day he'll knock on my door.' Then the next day. And the next day. But you never did! But I kept waiting. Hoping."

"But I..."

"It took me a long time, I know; but I finally understood that if you hurt a person deep enough, maybe they aren't even capable of seeing the truth. Maybe it's not possible for them to figure out that I wanted them to come after me ... because ... because I still love them! So much!!"

I just stared at the floor. This was an awful lot to take in.

"I've been searching for you, Ben! I've been trying to find you for a long time! I even quit my job!"

"You're kidding?"

"No."

"Really?"

"Ben, where were you? Where did you go?"

Then starting at the beginning, I began filling her in on everything that happened after she left. I told her about losing my position at the company, and moving into the shack in the canyon and disappearing from the world. But I left out the parts about Vincent and Elias. We would get to that later.

"Oh, Ben! I never..."

"Shhh. I know. I know." I put my hand on her shoulder as she began sobbing.

When she finally calmed down, she looked up at me with tear-stained eyes. There was no denying what I was feeling for her. It would seem that my heart had not died the day she left, after all.

"Okay." I said. "If you're ready, it's my turn."

All she could do was nod.

"Susan ... what are you doing here!? How did you get here!?"

A few more snuffles, then a couple of deep breaths. "Okay, I'm ready." she said.

"Take your time."

She smiled at me in thanks. "Okay, so ... I tracked you as far as the motel."

"The motel after I sold the condo."

"Yes. But after that, I lost the trail. You were really thorough. I should've been able to track you to the canyon, through the deed to the house, or the escrow, or a bill of sale, or something!"

"Actually, it wasn't much of a house, per se." I said. "I sort of bought it from a guy that worked at that electronics store that I used to go to all the time. He told me he had a little place that was off the county books, so I would never have to be bothered with taxes or paperwork. It was completely self-sustaining, so there was no need for utilities. I paid him cash."

"How did he end up with a place like that?" she asked.

"Remember Y2K? The Year 2000 Millennium bug? Where all the computers would die and the world would end?"

"No way!"

"Yup. He was convinced, so he built the place in his spare time. When the world didn't end, well, you know the rest."

Susan laughed.

"So, anyway, you were saying..." I prodded.

"Okay, so ... then I went to visit Kevin Marshall."

"Kevin!"

"He told me about what had happened, and that he knew about someone named Vincent who had sabotaged your job. Did you know anything about that?" she asked.

"Uh, yeah ... we'll get to that in a minute. So ... Kevin said all that?"

"More or less. He's a good friend. I think he's worried about you."

I smiled. I missed Kevin. "So then..." I said, prodding her again to

continue.

"So then, it was the end of the line. There was nowhere else to go. I was devastated. I'd been looking for you, for so long."

"Wait ... you quit your job? How long were you looking for me? What did you live on?"

"My savings."

"How much of it?"

"All of it." she answered.

"What!? I gave you that money to take care of you! That should have lasted you the rest of your life!"

"Ben, without you, I had no life!"

"Susan!! You've gotta be kidding me!"

She just looked at me.

"But ... it ... I can't believe ... ALL of it?"

She shrugged.

"I mean that was an awful lot of..."

"Would you stop!"

"Yeah, yeah, okay."

Then I sighed.

"All of it?" I asked, yet again.

Susan slugged me.

"Ouch! Okay! Okay! All right, already. So, then what happened?" I asked, rubbing my arm.

"So then I got really, really angry with you."

"Ah."

"Later that night, I went for a long walk. I walked as far as the old canal. I

wanted to be away from everybody and everything."

"The canal? It's all deserted! That's not very smart, Susan; it's not safe, way out there in the middle of nowhere."

"Yeah, well, have mercy on any mugger who tried coming anywhere near me."

I smiled; I didn't doubt it.

"So, I'm out there ... alone. And I start screaming!"

"Nice."

"I'm screaming at you! I'm screaming at me! I'm screaming at the whole world! And while I'm letting it all out, I keep thinking in the back of my mind that I'm hearing this voice. So I stop and start looking around, ready to tear off whoever's head was interrupting me ... and then I saw him."

I already knew.

"And ... it was just the way he spoke to me..."

"What did he say?"

\*\*\* \*\*

*Looking for someone?*

*Who are you? What do you want?*

*I know where he is.*

*What are you talking about?*

*Ben needs you.*

*What did you say!?*

*Just as much as you need him.*

*You know where Ben is!?*

*I am here to offer you a great gift; a rare gift of unspeakable value.*

*What!?*

*I am here to offer you ... a Second Chance.*



## Chapter 19

When she finished, neither of us said anything for awhile, as we just enjoyed the peace. I didn't know when I put my arm around her, but I knew that I never wanted this quiet moment to end. We simply sat there, pondering everything that had happened to us.

I was the one who finally broke the silence. "So ... when did you get here?"

"Two months ago."

"What!?" I exclaimed, as I pulled away in shock. "Two months? That's when I got here! You've been here all this time!?"

She nodded.

"But..."

"Why didn't I come by earlier?"

"Well ... YEAH!"

"Lots of reasons. I mean ... for starters, look at me! Ben, I'm 14 years old!"

"Believe me, I know!"

"Yes, I've noticed." she said with a smile.

I looked down, slightly embarrassed.

"But ... you know what it's like!" she continued. "It took me a long time to get used to it."

I nodded.

"And then, do you know who was the first person I saw when I woke up? My dad!"

"Oh, wow. I'm sorry, I forgot."

"No, that's okay. But ... my dad, Ben! Do you have any idea what it's like to ... oh, my gosh - I keep forgetting you've gone through the same with your dad. And David, too! Ben! What was it like!?"

Then we spent the next hour talking about family reunions.

"But I did come by, you know." Susan said, changing the subject.

"What? When?"

"Lots of times. But only to make sure that you were still around. I really didn't want to lose you again."

"You were spying on me!?"

"Sort of. I never got a close look or anything, but I could hear your voice and I knew that you were okay."

"You still haven't answered my question."

"Because, Ben; I didn't know how you would react. I knew that I had hurt you. I guess I just needed to see how you would react to me under normal circumstances, first."

"And ... so ... the only way to do that, was to wait until school started."

"Uh huh."

"The first time we saw each other ... you looked away."

"That was..."

"I know. Tell me about it."

Susan smiled at me. "I'd forgotten how cute you were. Are! Still are!"

I smiled back. "Susan, what about..."

"Us? How we drifted apart?"

"I've had plenty of time to think about it, the last ten years." I said.

"Me, too."

"How did it happen? I mean ... when we first got married ... it was..."

"Yes it was." she said, as she touched my hand. "Very much so!"

I grinned at her. "And we grew up together! We were best friends! How could that happen to us?"

"I honestly don't know, Ben. Our careers ... our friends ... but I'm pretty sure it first started all the way back when..."

"Yeah. You're definitely right about that. That was devastating ... for both of us. It really wiped us out; more than we realized, I guess. Things were never really the same after that, were they?"

We remained silent for a time.

"It's good to see them both, again." she finally said, with tears starting to form, once again.

I decided it was best to change the subject. "Susan, did ... Elias ever say anything to you about why he sent me back?"

"Honestly, if he did, I don't remember it. All I remember is him talking about going back in time, because that's where you went. I was pretty much a basket case when he was explaining everything, and I know I missed a lot of it. But I did grasp enough to know that this was a one-way trip for both of us."

"It's hard for me to picture you as a basket case. You were always the sensible one."

Susan looked down at the floor. "Yes ... well ... love can make you do the crazy." she sighed.

"Yes, it can."

She looked back up at me hopefully. "It can?"

"Most definitely."

That's when I kissed her.

And ... that's when we heard the gasp.

\*\*\* \*\*

My first gut-wrenching feeling was that Mom had just walked in on us and caught us making out.

If only that's all it was. Unfortunately, it was much, much worse.

"Uh, Ben, I think we have company." Susan whispered.

Obviously caught in the act, we both slowly turned our heads to see who was standing there. It was none other than Stuart and Zagnut.

Stuart had a completely blank stare on his face. Zagnut looked like a codfish with his mouth opening and closing and opening and closing.

But it got even worse.

"Uh, guys ... how long have you been standing there?"

Stuart shook his head a few times and then said, "Oh, I don't know; I'd say about ten minutes or so. Wouldn't you say, Zag?"

\*\*\* \*\*

Then my mom walked in.

"I just spoke with each of your parents, and they said it would be fine if all of you wanted to stay for dinner. So you boys are welcome to stay. You, too, Susan!"

She gave Susan a huge smile and then walked back out.

I looked over at Stuart and Zagnut. "Guys, maybe after dinner we can go out back and talk?"

Without a reply, they turned and headed for the kitchen. Apparently, they were now refusing to speak to us.

Fortunately, much of the dinner conversation was Mom asking about summer vacations and what the boys had been doing. Neither Susan nor I said very much. The guys pretty much ignored us. Then Dad brought up the subject of golf, and for the first time since I could remember, both Stuart and Zagnut showed an unusual interest in the subject.

After dinner, the four of us went outside.

"Okay, so I guess we owe you guys an explanation." I started off saying.

Again, the silent treatment. They just looked at us, with arms crossed. Susan and I looked at each other - she was obviously waiting for me to take the lead.

"All right, then. Here we go. Ah ... hmmm ... okay. Let's start with this. Stuart ... Zag ... Susan and I ... well ... we kinda like each other..."

"No, no, no." Stuart interrupted. "Don't give me the 'we like each other' bit. We already know that. Geez, you guys have been making goo-goo eyes at each other since the 8th grade! Gimme a break!"

Zagnut was nodding in agreement.

Susan and I looked at each other. *Eighth grade!? They've known all this time? Even before WE knew!?*

"But I'll tell you what we didn't know!" Stuart continued. "We didn't know **YOU WERE MARRIED!!**"

We both just stood there speechless.

"Among other things! Why ... don't ... you ... just ... start ... there!"

\*\*\* \*\*

At first, things came out slowly. I wasn't sure how much they would accept or believe. Surprisingly, they seemed to be taking it rather well. After awhile, it started coming out faster and faster. Susan had joined in by that time and both of us found ourselves spilling our guts about everything.

Well, almost everything.

I really gotta hand it to those two. They both surprised us and impressed us.

Stuart switched into Mr. Wizard mode and started analyzing all the information we were providing. Zagnut, after getting past his initial responses of "Cool! Cool!", started asking us questions. And not goofy questions that you would have expected like: "Was Gilligan's Island still on in your time?" But serious questions. About us, and what led to our breaking up. Of course, we couldn't tell him everything. But he actually had some really insightful observations. Zagnut is a good judge of character and as I've said before, he is loyal. Deep down, I think there is a budding psychologist waiting to break through.

I was surprised at how quickly they got past the whole time-travel thing. I guess when you're young and not a cynical adult, you get past stuff like that easier.

"So ... you guys are like ... old enough to be my grandparents now!" Zagnut quipped.

"Watch it!" Susan warned.

"It sure sounds like her!" said Zagnut.

"It is me, you dork!"

"Stu, that's Susan!"

"I don't know." Stuart replied, shaking his head.

"Stu, it's ME!" I pleaded.

"I know it's you, Ben. It's ... it's just that it's not YOU you."

"Stu..."

"Listen. I know it's you. And I know that you're sitting right here, and that we're the same age ... sort of ... maybe not. But think about it, Ben. I'm almost 15. In 6 months, I'm gonna get my driving permit. You? You've owned a dozen cars and have been driving for 45 years! Do you see what I'm saying?"

"Yeah, you guys have had sex!" Zagnut blurted out.

Susan rolled her eyes.

"Okay, yeah, you're right about those things. And no, Zag, we're not answering any questions on that subject. So sure, we've already lived a life ... sort of. Maybe not a very good one, but we've lived a portion of it already. But that's only half the picture, Stu! You're forgetting the other part. This doesn't change the fact that we all grew up together! We've been together since kindergarten! And even though it hasn't happened to you two, yet, we went through high school and on to college together."

"College!?" Zagnut asked.

"I've already told you, we're not disclosing anything about your futures. Ever! That's not negotiable."

"Except, Zag, I will say this." smiled Susan. "You surprised all of us."

"I did!?"

I looked at her.

"No harm in a little encouragement." she shrugged. "I won't say anything more, I promise."

"So, anyway...", I continued, "...what I'm trying to say is - so what, if we sort of fast forwarded part of our lives ahead of you? That doesn't change what we've all been through, together. Or what we're all going to go through together, now. This time."

"You already know this was a one-way trip for us." added Susan. "That means, we are going through this. Together. All of us."

"But you've already been through this!" complained Zagnut. "You already know what's going to happen!"

"Actually, Zag, I don't." I replied. "I honestly don't know what's going to happen in my future anymore. I know what happened in my previous future, but as of now, that future hasn't been written yet. Heck, even YOUR futures are your 'past' futures. Not your current futures. Just because it happened one way last time, doesn't mean that it will happen that way this time." *At least I hope it doesn't.*

"I'm so confused." whined Zagnut.

"Zag, listen; I have no idea what's going to happen tomorrow. Any more than you do. I had no idea I was going to end up in the E.R., last night! This is all new to me. Just as it is to Susan. Just as it is to Stuart. Just as it is to you."

Then Stuart chimed in, "You know, Zag, he never saw the water balloon coming."

"You're right, he didn't!"

"That's what Ben is trying to say." said Susan. "Every day is going to be a whole new adventure. For all of us. Even Ben and I. That hasn't changed. And I for one, am honestly looking forward to our new future together."

"Listen, it's getting late and Mom is gonna be out any minute to break this up." I said. "But one more thing before you go. So far, I still haven't touched on the subject about WHY I came back in the first place. But it's important, and we need to talk about it."

"Yeah, I've got a lot of questions about that." Stuart said.

"I figured you would. Tomorrow, I promise. Besides, I really wanted to talk to Susan about it first."

"Preferential treatment!" Zagnut accused.

"Zag, she's his wife!" said Stuart.

"Yeah, about that. How's that gonna work? I mean, you guys aren't old enough to ... uh ... you know..."

"Live together?" Susan quickly piped up. "You know what? We don't

know yet, either. We haven't had a chance to talk about that yet. Somebody interrupted us!"

Zagnut looked sheepish.

"But we'll keep you posted, Zag."

"Uh ... okay."



## Chapter 20

It was good to be back at school. The last couple of days had been a wild ride, both physically and emotionally. And just getting back into a semi-normal routine, well ... that felt good.

Susan didn't have a third period class, so I decided to cut class - just this once! I wanted to have a chance to talk with her alone before we met up with the gang. As she exited the classroom, she started looking around for me - obviously knowing that I would be there.

*How does she do that?*

"Hi."

"Hi."

Susan started talking on the way over to our spot. "I just can't get over Stu and Zag! This really is ... I don't know ... incredible! You know?"

"I know. At first I thought they were simply stalling us until the white coats arrived to take us away."

"No, I don't mean that. I mean that they've known about us since the 8th grade."

"Huh? Uh, okay. But isn't that just slightly less profound than everything else that's going on?"

"I don't think so, Ben. I've been thinking about this all night."

"All night!?"

"First of all, I've already had two months to adjust to ... everything. Sure, there was the initial shock of it all, but I've had time to adapt and I'm moving forward, now. Besides, I found you, and that's all I really cared about."

"But ... aren't you the least bit curious about how all this is even possible? I mean, think about it! We've gone back in time! And we're young again!!"

"I suppose. But the science is your thing. I got what I wanted." she said as she put her arm in mine. "I figured I'd just let you do the math, and give me the Reader's Digest condensed version, later."

"Okay, so back to Stu and Zag..." I said.

"The second thing is, they've known about us for two years, and never said anything. They were even considerate enough to not embarrass us."

"That is pretty profound, I guess."

"It's more than profound, Ben! Not only are they considerate, they're smart. Both of them! They've proven they have common sense and sound judgment."

"We're talking about Zagnut here."

"I know. He'll always be a clown. But he's also very intelligent. We found out just how intelligent in college."

"Yeah, I know. I just don't like thinking about what happened, though. Stu and Zag ... both of them..."

"Maybe it won't happen this time." she said.

I sighed. "Maybe. I hope not."

"Anyway..." she continued, "...what I was saying was, they're smart. They're intelligent. They're resourceful. And they're our dearest, closest friends. They could be very useful."

"Useful? What are you talking about?"

"Ben, I know that you're not here by accident. There's a reason. And I know you're going to tell me, soon enough. But I've been thinking about it all summer, and that whatever it is, it's very important. Something happened ... in the future. And whatever it was, it was bad. So bad, that you were sent back to stop it."

It wasn't a question.

*Man, she's good.*

"But I was sent back, too, Ben. That was no accident, either. Elias even said, 'Ben needs you'. And I know that this couldn't just be all about 'us'. And now, Stuart and Zagnut are in on it, too."

"You think we're all supposed to be in this together."

"I know so."

"Wow. That's ... really impressive, Sherlock!"

"I thought so." she smiled.

"Did you get any sleep at all?"

"Oh ... I had a nice dream or two."

She looked at me mischievously, making me blush.

*Blush!*

"You know, Susan, we really need to talk about..."

"Will you two get a room? Geez, Louise!" It was Stuart and Zagnut.

*Man, their timing just ...*

\*\*\* \*\*

"So let me get this straight." said Stuart, at lunch. "I get the part about the mini black hole. No problem there."

"You do?"

"Sure, the physics makes sense. I've got no problem with that. What I don't get is, **EVERYBODY HAS THEIR OWN COMPUTER!**? What, does everyone just grow an extra room onto the house or something? Where do they put it? And when does that happen?"

"Well, about four years from now, there are these two guys you see ... Steve Jobs and Bill Gates..."

"Ben!" scolded Susan.

"Oh! Oh, yeah! Sorry, I keep forgetting. Uh ... scratch that."

"Steve Jobs and Bill Gates ... I'll have to remember those names."

*Great. Sorry, Elias ... I didn't mean it! Honest!!* "Well, I CAN tell you this. My wristwatch was more powerful than the biggest computer around today. You're gonna love these next few years, Stu."

"NO WAY!!!"

"I want to hear more about this mysterious Elias dude!" Zagnut asked, excitedly.

"I think we need to know more about Vincent right now." Susan stated, seriously.

I noticed that Susan now wasn't looking so good. "Yeah, Susan's right." I said. "We'll have plenty of time to talk about all of this, but Vincent is the main concern."

"What do you know about him?" Zagnut asked.

"Honestly, not that much. He was brought in as an outside consultant on another small project I was working on. He seemed to attach himself to me - like he wanted to become my assistant or something. He had the resume and the experience and the clearance. And he seemed bright enough. We brought him on staff, full time."

"What all did you and Vincent talk about?" Zagnut asked.

"Just work-related stuff, mostly. We never really discussed anything personal."

"From what I understand of you in the future, you never really discussed anything personal, with anyone. Not even Susan." said Zagnut, the shrink.

"Touché." I admitted, feeling very guilty.

Susan gently touched my arm.

"Yeah, what's up with that?" Stuart asked. "Two months ago you were this uber hermit, loner dude who never talked to anybody ... and now look at you! You're the same Ben you always were ... or used to be. What changed?"

"You know, I'm not sure. Seeing my dad again ... and my brother..."

"That really sucked." Zagnut said.

"Then seeing you guys, again."

"Why? Something happen to us?"

I had to look away for a moment. "And seeing you." I continued to Susan, ignoring Zagnut's question.

Susan smiled up at me.

"I really missed you guys. All of you. Very much."

Stuart coughed and now Zagnut was looking the other way.

Stuart jumped in next. "You said Vincent had the resume and the experience. How much of it do you remember?"

"Nothing. None of it. That's the frustrating part. I don't even remember his last name! I wish there were a way I could travel forward in time to check out his files. But I can't think of a single lead to track him down."

"I have to admit..." said Susan, "...I didn't like hearing the part about Vincent. I didn't realize there was an actual adversary in all of this."

"Okay, so there's a bad guy." said Zagnut. "But you know what? We've got time on our side! Lots of time. He doesn't know about us, but we know about him."

*If only ...*

"But do we even have to worry about him?" replied Susan. "Why can't you just ignore your research? Don't record any of it. If he doesn't know about it, then he can't use it."

"There are two problems with that." I said. "First, Kevin once told me that Vincent had asked him about the research, as if Vincent already knew something about it. That was before he found the disk."

"Kevin, your friend from work?" Stuart asked.

"Yes. I don't know how Vincent knew that I had been working on it, but that's probably what brought him to the company in the first place."

"He must have had spies." suggested Zagnut.

"Probably."

"So, then, don't work on that project ever! No matter what company you end up at." Susan said. "Problem solved."

"That's the second problem. Believe me, I've thought long and hard on this. The real problem isn't my research. The real problem is Vincent."

Stuart responded, "Even if he never gains access to your micro black hole technology, what's to stop him from gaining access to other technology just as dangerous?"

"Exactly."

"I was afraid of this." Susan said, fearfully.

"I'm sorry, Susan. I'm sorry, all of you. But the reason I came back ... the reason I was given a Second Chance ... was to stop Vincent."

## Chapter 21

Nobody said much on the way home after school, as obviously, everyone had a lot on their minds. There was a dark, heavy cloud hanging over all of our heads that afternoon.

I offered to walk Susan home.

"Let's go the park instead." she said.

We found a quiet spot and sat next to each other.

"Ben, I'm scared."

I nodded. "I know. Me, too."

"You are!? Since when!? I've never known you to be afraid of anything."

"Well, I wasn't ... at least not until a few days ago."

"Why?"

"Because a few days ago, it was just me. Alone. And I was okay with that."

Susan looked down.

"Back in the canyon, when I was thinking about this decision, I walked outside for awhile. All around me, I could see the effects of that mini black hole that Vincent had begun to unleash. And I was frightened."

Susan looked back up at me.

"But then I started thinking ... *'Here I am, 60 years old. I don't have many years left. I'm living here in a canyon all by myself. I've lost Susan. I've lost all my friends. Most of my family is gone...'* I had to pause for a moment as those terrible feelings came flooding back.

"You had nothing left to lose."

I nodded. "And then I wasn't afraid anymore. In fact, for the first time in a long time, it actually gave me a sense of purpose. Like I was needed. Like there was one more thing that I could do with my life. Something ... important." I thought to myself for a moment. "It was an easy decision, really."

"How could that be an easy decision!?"

"Susan, there is something that I've been meaning to tell you. I guess it might as well be now." *Deep breath.* "Susan, I didn't come back here to be young again. I didn't come back here to live my life over again. I came back here to die."

"What!? BEN!!!"

"Listen to me. This thing with Vincent ... this was never about stopping him thirty years in the future."

Then it hit her. "You want to stop him now!"

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"Susan, listen to me ... calm down, would you!?"

"No, I won't listen! This whole thing is absurd!"

"We can't wait! The risk is too great! What if ... what if something should happen to me? I've already ended up in the hospital once! I kept thinking, what if it had been worse? Then who would have stopped him? Answer: no one. Nobody knows about him, but me! No one will EVER know about him, but me. Don't you see?"

Then she began yelling at me. "All I see is a foolish old man who would rather go out in a blaze of glory than be smart about this and think it through!!!"

"I HAVE thought it through, Susan! Vincent is my age. That means right now, wherever he is, he is still young. And harmless. He's no threat to anybody. But all that's going to change. I can't wait thirty years!"

"No! NO!! I won't lose you again!!!" Susan lost it and literally started pounding on my chest.

"Susan! For crying out loud! Would you just calm down!? Even five years is too long to wait! I have to find him now, don't you see!?"

I was now having to hold her back at arm's length.

"Stop telling me to calm down! Ben, Vincent is dangerous!! I know he is! Don't ask me how I know, I just do."

"How dangerous could he possibly be, huh? He can't be more than a



teenager!"

"BEN, NO!! I won't let you do it!!!" she screamed.

"She's right, you know."

It didn't even register at first, that someone else was there. I heard the voice, but I was sorta distracted by a tiny, crazed wild woman attacking me.

"Susan, it's okay." the voice said calmly.

Funny; whatever I said just kept getting her more upset and aggravated. A total stranger shows up and with three simple words, she immediately begins to settle down. Go figure.

I didn't have to look to know who it was. Although I still couldn't believe it.

"Hello, Elias."

"Hello, Ben Davison. Hello to you, too, Susan Davison."

That cinched it.

"Wow." said Susan, starting to calm down. "It's been ... years since anyone has called me by that name." she said, as she began smoothing back her hair and wiping her eyes. "I'm glad I'm not old enough to be wearing makeup."

Don't ask me why, but that struck me kinda funny, and I started to snicker.

Then to my amazement, so did Susan.

Then she hit me one more time, for good measure.

\*\*\* \*\*

The three of us walked over to the nearest picnic table. On the table were three large cups of water and a large plate with bread and cheese. I laughed when I saw Susan's mouth drop open. Elias looked at me and winked.

"I'll tell you later." I said to her, smiling.

I looked back at Elias. "So ... I've got a million questions for you. But I guess I'll start with the most important one, at the moment."

Elias nodded.

"What did you mean when you said that Susan was right?"

"I believe she said something along the lines of 'you going out in a blaze of glory, instead of thinking it through'."

"Elias, I..."

"Speak truly. For was that not your original intent?"

"Well..." I was embarrassed to admit there MAY have been some truth to that. Just a little. Maybe.

"There is no shame in wanting to defeat that which is evil in this world."

"Thank you, Elias."

"But to attempt to do so without guidance, preparation and wisdom is a fool's errand."

"Great. Thanks ever so much."

"There is wisdom in a multitude of counselors."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means, blockhead...", said Susan, "...to listen to your friends first, before you go running off half-cocked and getting yourself killed!"

I looked at Elias. He smiled and nodded in agreement.

"She was also right about Vincent being a threat." he continued.

"See! I told you!!" Susan said.

"Vincent's a threat NOW?" I exclaimed. "At my age!?"

"It is with great displeasure, I must inform you. At this moment, your foe has already murdered his father, his mother, and many innocent men, women and children. Furthermore, he has established four command posts in the northern and southern regions of Mexico, and has amassed a small army."

I just sat there and blinked. We were both completely stunned. Even Susan hadn't expected anything of this magnitude!

Neither Susan or I spoke for a long time.

Finally, I said something. "Wow. All I've done is plan out my semester

class schedule."

Elias smiled at me, but his eyes were filled with great sadness.

Then after a few more minutes of stunned silence ... "I'm going to need a bigger boat."[\[1\]](#)

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It was getting close to dinnertime, so we knew we should head home soon, before our parents formed a search posse. Tomorrow was Saturday, so Elias agreed to meet us early the next morning at the same location. He also agreed to allow Stuart and Zagnut to join us.

I walked Susan home, hand in hand. We didn't speak much, both of us deep in our thoughts. When we got to her door, she turned towards me. "Ben, I'm sorry for..."

This time I put my finger to her lips and shushed her! I shook my head, and then kissed her. And I kissed her again. And one more time, for good measure. "You know, there is one more thing that I've been meaning to tell you."

"Oh?" she said, looking at me suspiciously.

"I love you, Mrs. Davison."

Susan grinned at me and put her arms around me. "I love you, too, Mr. Davison."

Suddenly, the front door of her house burst open. Of all people, it was Zagnut.

"Pizza! Pizza! Pizza! Come on, you guys, everybody's gonna be here any minute!"

Apparently, all four families were coming over to Susan's for a Friday night pizza party.

I sighed. I had really been looking forward to having some alone time with her, that night. Her pained expression told me the same thing.

\*\*\* \*\*

You know, it's tough being a teenager in love. You want to be alone with your girl, but everybody is constantly pulling you away from each other. You

can never seem to find the time or place to be alone.

But you know what's even worse? Try being a teenager in love who has been married for thirty years.

Cry ... me ... a ... river.

## Chapter 22

"Bacon! I smell bacon!!" Zag hollered as we neared the park. He had met me halfway. I could see Susan and Stuart were already there. And, of course, there was Elias, cooking up breakfast, just like he did for me back in the canyon. I'm sorry, but I just gotta say it again. *Handy guy to have around!* And, of course, there was no sign or indication of how the food got there in the first place.

"So, Mr. Elias, sir." Stuart was starting to say.

"Just Elias is fine, Stuart."

"Whoa! Dude, he knew your name!" remarked an amazed Zagnut.

"That's because I just introduced him, you dork!" said Susan.

Elias laughed. "And you must be..."

"Zagnut."

"Zag ... nut." Elias seemed to be having trouble saying it.

"It's a nickname that I've had since I was seven."

"Okay, Zagnut. It is a pleasure to meet you."

"You too, sir."

"I imagine you have all already had breakfast. I hope you do not mind..."

"All I had was a piece of toast! Thanks!"

"Cereal here."

"Same."

"Me, too."

"Well, then, hearty up, me lads!"

"Whoa, did you ever know any real pirates!?" asked an enthralled Zagnut.

"Well, I..."

I immediately interrupted. I don't know why, but I'm still a little uneasy about this aspect of the mystery known as Elias. "Listen, before we get into this fascinating discussion about pirates, we have some more important things to discuss first. Savvy?"

"Aww, man!" Zagnut whined.

"Aye, aye, captain." said Elias, offering a confirming wink to Zagnut.

"Yes!" Zag exclaimed.

Then for the next three hours, Elias and I laid it all out. I reviewed every detail - from my research, to the events leading to my losing my job, and what happened afterwards.

Elias filled all of us in on everything he knew about Vincent. Most of it, I didn't know. We learned about his father's Romanian/Nazi background, and about his involvement in the Jewish holocaust. We learned about Eva and Selena. We learned how Vincent had killed both his father and his mother, and had assumed control of his father's empire.

I was glad that Susan, Stuart and Zagnut were all there. All three came up with questions and observations that I never would have come up with on my own.

Finally, Susan asked, "So where is Vincent now?"

"That, I am afraid, I do not know. By all accounts, he no longer appears to be in Mexico."

"Does that mean that he's here in this country?" I asked.

"I do not know. He may be. Or he may be somewhere else, entirely. Unfortunately, I have lost track of his whereabouts."

"If we find him..." Stuart asked, "...what are we supposed to do with him?"

"We can't just kill him." Zagnut said. "That's just ... wrong."

"He's already killed hundreds of people, Zag!" said Susan. "Including his own parents!"

"Well, I don't think I could kill anyone, either." Stuart said. "I'm sorry, but I couldn't do it."

"You know what, guys?" I interrupted. "We don't have to worry about

that, now. Let's just concentrate on finding him. We can figure out what to do with him, later."

"Agreed."

"Works for me."

"Okay, I'm cool with that."

I looked around the table at Stuart, Zagnut, and Susan. "You know, guys, I'm still sorta struggling with the fact that I've dragged all of you into this. I'm also surprised how you, Stu, and you, Zag, are taking this so calmly. When Susan and I first found out the truth of all this..."

Zagnut answered first. "Stu and I already talked this over the other night, when we first found out about you and Susan."

"You did?"

"Look. We pretty much figured out that this really wasn't about you two getting more neck time."

"Oh, gosh." Susan exclaimed.

Stuart continued. "We knew this was a little bigger than that. Truth is, this is pretty much right along the lines we thought it would be."

"We've just been waiting for the other shoe to drop." agreed Zagnut.

"You guys..." I started to say.

"Listen." said Zagnut. "We've already decided that we're here for you. Whatever happens. We've already guessed that it might also be dangerous."

Stuart continued. "But what is happening is a lot bigger than any of us. And if we don't do this, it's gonna get us in the end, anyway! Either way..."

"Besides, we've got Elias, here, on our side to ... uh ... where'd he go?" Zagnut interrupted, looking around.

Elias was nowhere to be found.

"Okay, how can someone just disappear like that?" asked Stuart.

I sighed. "There's a lot of things about Elias that I don't understand. Join the club."

"Like how he shows up here, when he's from your time." said Zagnut.

"He probably got here the same way we did." Susan suggested.

"I don't think so." I said. "This was a one-way trip for us. We can't go back. But Elias hinted at stuff he did hundreds of years ago. Then he shows up in my future. Now he shows up again in the past."

"How old do you think he is?" asked Zagnut. "Do you really think he's hundreds of years old?"

"Maybe not." said Stuart. "We already know that he can travel through time. How he does that, we've yet to discover. But maybe that's what gives the illusion that he's hundreds of years old."

"Except that he actually told me he was even older than that." I said.

Stuart shrugged.

"Who is he, Ben?" Susan asked.

"I don't know. I'm not sure I want to know."

"Maybe it's none of our business." said Susan. "Maybe we should respect his privacy."

"I think we should find out all we can about him." Stuart said. "If we're going to be risking our necks to hunt down this Vincent guy, aren't we entitled to know who's giving us the intel?"

"Intel', Stu?" I teased. "You've been playing too many video games."

"What's a video game?"

Susan and I looked at each other and laughed.

"You're definitely gonna love these next few years, Stu." she smiled.

"I agree with Susan." offered Zagnut. "If he wants us to know, then he'll tell us."

"He IS on our side, right?" asked Stuart. "I mean, we're just four kids and this is kinda a big deal. We should have at least one adult on the team."

"Are you kidding!?" laughed Zagnut. "These two are old fogeys!"

"Zag..." Susan threatened.



"Oh, yeah, I keep forgetting that."

"I'm sure, when the time is right and he's needed, he'll pop up again." I said, looking at Susan. "He always does."

After a few thoughtful moments of silence, I continued. "You guys, I want you all to know how much this means to me."

"Duly noted." said Stuart, with a salute. "So what are our marching orders, O Captain! My Captain?"

"Very well. I think we need a base of our own."

## **~ Home Field Advantage ~**

## Chapter 23

We succeeded in getting the garage set up, just the way I wanted it. Charts and maps over on the left, plenty of shelving for a small library, and a large table in the center. And in the right-hand corner was a very special table with nothing on it.

Yet.

Mom thought the idea of us building a "clubhouse" was "darling". She brought out some sodas, sandwiches and chips, along with some plates, napkins - even a table cloth. I know she was just being a mom, but a checkerboard table cloth just didn't fit in with my idea of a commando research base. Everything was starting to look so - foofy! But she insisted and there was nothing I could do.

After lunch, Susan asked, "So what's our first order of business?"

"I need you and Zag to take a trip to the library. Bring back everything you can find on Mexico, Nazi Germany, and Ion Victor Atonescu. And write down everything you find on micro-fiche."

"Everything!?"

"Everything. Think you can get your mom to drive you? You'll have way too much to carry."

"What about me?" Stuart asked.

"Stu, we're going shopping."

"What for?"

"You and I, my friend, are going to build us a computer."

"Wha ... wha ... what!? How!?"

"Relax - there are enough basic electronics available even in 1973 to pull this off; IF you know what to look for. I just happen to know something about that. Believe me, I've had all summer to come up with the shopping list."

Stuart was in a state of rapture.

"Most of the parts aren't expensive. A couple of them ... well ... I hope you're not too attached to your cassette recorder, your synthesizer, or the TV

set in your room."

That snapped him out of it.

"Oh, and that new calculator you got for your birthday."

"What!?"

"Come on, Stu ... this is important." Susan implored.

"We'll also need your entire set of Encyclopedia Britannica. It's the closest thing to Google that we've got."

"Google?"

"Never mind."

"Oh, one more thing. Does your dad still have that old electric typewriter?"

Stuart groaned.

"Okay, everyone has their assignments. Let's meet back here at 6:00 sharp."

"Aren't you going to ask us to synchronize our watches?" Susan teased.

I smiled back. "See you all at six. And good luck!"

We split up and went our separate ways.

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After everyone had left, Elias stepped into the garage and looked around.

"Excellent."

## Chapter 24

That night, while Susan and Zagnut poured through volumes of books, I was developing incredible animosity towards a multitude of inanimate objects that were spread out before us.

I was often rebuking the computer parts for not behaving the way they should. I found myself explaining, in no uncertain terms, how they should be operating and interfacing, yet they continually failed to comply with my impeccable direction.

"I don't think even Wozniak could make you guys listen." I said with disgust.

"Wozniak?" said Stuart.

"You'll find out."

The plan was to use the Intel 4004 CPU and RAM memory from the calculator, the keyboard from the electric typewriter, the TV as the screen, and the power supply and transistor circuitry from the synthesizer. The wire, solder and parts we purchased would fill in the gaps. The cassette tape recorder would provide the permanent, magnetic data storage. Stuart's calculator even had crude printer functionality built-in, which was a nice, unexpected bonus.

The operating system? Well, Operating Systems were Susan's specialty back in college. She was a programming genius. She wouldn't have any problem writing a simple BASIC Interpreter, based on the same magical code that Bill Gates and Paul Allen wrote for the original Altair computer.

That was the plan. But nobody was cooperating. It was 2 a.m. and I was about ready to throw everything out the window.

"Why don't you give me a crack at it?" Stuart said.

"Stu, we've both been working together on this all night! You've had as much a 'crack at it' as I have."

"Actually, no. This has been YOUR design with YOUR schematics with YOUR concepts based on YOUR knowledge in the future. Maybe we need to look at this from a 1973 perspective."

"Fine, whatever. Knock yourself out."

Exasperated, I stepped outside for some fresh air. It was only when a pair of slim arms encircled my waist from behind, that I started to relax.

"You're trying too hard." she said.

"It's just..."

"Just what?"

"The truth is, it was a lot easier when it was just me."

"Why was it easier?"

"Because. I didn't have to worry about Stu or Zag then. I didn't have to worry about you. I was the only one who was putting his life on the line. I didn't have to look out for anyone else. I was the only one I was responsible for."

Susan just hugged me for a few minutes. Finally ... "There's no 'I' in 'Team'."

I sighed. *I know. She's right. She's always right.*

We sat down on a couple of lawn chairs in the back yard, looking up at the night sky.

"Vega." Susan said, pointing out a bright star. "And there is Draconis 26 in the constellation Draco the Dragon."

"Vega and Draconis. Got it." Susan had always been into astronomy, even as a little girl.

"Draconis is 34 light years away."

"Okay."

She kept staring at those two stars for a few minutes. "The light from Draconis won't reach earth until you are alone, living in the canyon."

"That's just so ... bizarre." Then I thought to myself for a moment. "But you're wrong, you know. For once."

"How's that?"

"By the time it gets there, I won't be in the canyon."

"How do you know that?"

"Well, because! I..."

"Ben, the reason you ended up there is because you were always isolating yourself from everyone around you. You isolated yourself from your family, you isolated yourself from your friends, you isolated yourself from people at work, you isolated yourself from me!"

"I know, but..."

"And you're doing it again! If you keep it up, you're going to end up right back in the canyon, all over again!"

Another sigh. "Maybe so."

"No maybe!"

I didn't know what to say. I just sat there looking at those two stars for awhile.

"Wahoo!" I heard Zagnut yell. Then clapping.

We looked at each other and shrugged, and then rose to our feet. When we entered the garage, there was Stuart, taking a bow in front of Zagnut.

"Thank you, thank you very much." Stuart was saying in an Elvis impersonation.

I looked over at the computer bench. Sitting in the top left corner of the screen was a tiny, unremarkable, beautiful blinking cursor.

I just stood there smiling, shaking my head. "There's no 'I' in 'Team'."

## Chapter 25

We each went home to get some sleep. I walked Susan home, and we were both exhausted.

We spent the next day organizing our new headquarters. I decided to be "hands-off" the computer project, letting the others finish assembling it and setting it all up in place. It was time for me to begin learning to delegate.

Susan focused on programming the operating system. Stuart had rigged a temporary interface to connect the electronic typewriter keyboard to the cassette tape recorder, in order to record the new operating system. Susan was amazing. She said that she could've done it in her sleep! Within four hours, she had completed her first pass. Stuart hooked up the tape player to the computer in an attempt to upload it. It worked. The first time! Instead of a little blinking cursor, it now said the word: READY.

We had our computer.

I let Susan teach them some of the basics of programming it. So while the other three excitedly played and tinkered with our new toy, I decided to organize our little library and do a little research.

The day went by very fast. By that evening, the three of them had already written a simple word processor program and the rudimentary beginnings of a database program.

The computer had been affectionately named Bob (after janitor Bob). It was Zagnut's idea. And much to Stuart's chagrin, he had also painted a giant, yellow happy face on the side of Bob's main CPU casing. But it seemed to give him character.

And me? Maybe because the subject of the day had been computers, I don't know; but I had managed to discover Dehomag.



## Chapter 26

I decided not to mention anything that evening. Instead, I just let them have their fun. All three of them were like little kids again, laughing and giggling. I decided to give them the night off, and that we could return to doom and gloom, tomorrow. After all, tomorrow was Monday and back to school, so ... it all seemed to tie together.

At lunch break, we were all surprised to learn that Stuart had dropped band. He felt it would give him more time on the task ahead. I told him how grateful I was. Personally, I don't think it was all that great a sacrifice. It took him less than a minute to mention how much extra time he would now have with the computer.

I mentioned Dehomag and the pre-war IBM/Nazi connections, along with Vincent's father's involvement in it all. And everyone agreed that it was worth looking into. Thus, we decided as a group that it was the best place to begin in our search for Vincent.

While Bob the computer was great for storing lots of data and allowing us to search the data for clues and dates and patterns and such, I was quite surprised to discover how much investigative research we could actually accomplish in a pre-computer world. Granted, there were large mainframe computers in operation around the globe, but the average person had no access to such technology. I came from a time where everybody owned several computers. Not just personal computers or laptops, but PDAs, cell phones, cars, TV's, music players, video game consoles - even automatic coffee pots!

*Speaking of coffee, I'm doing okay. Go figure. In case you were wondering. But I digress.*

I'm beginning to suspect that perhaps I had already been living in the age of "Skynet" and "The Terminator", and that we had already become slaves to computers ... we just hadn't realized it yet. The truth is, we are doing pretty well here in 1973, without the aid of computers, believe it or not.

For the next several weeks we became completely consumed with Dehomag. Disbanded after the war, we were able to pick up small traces, here and there. Slowly but surely we stayed hot on the trail of Vincent's father.

By the end of October we were fully convinced of Vincent's motive for killing his father - he wanted into the U.S. and into IBM. But we still couldn't

find any traces of Vincent within the U.S. or IBM, locally or internationally.

It was Zagnut who suggested that it was time to switch gears and begin focusing on the "why". Why the U.S.? Why IBM? We knew the "why" for my future company and my project. So how do we connect the dots between then and now? If we could do that, then maybe we could find Vincent. Or at least narrow things down. We spent the next month trying to find the answers.

By the time Thanksgiving rolled around, we were exhausted. We had all gotten into bad workaholic patterns of too much work and not enough sleep. We had all grown impatient and irritable, and were starting to snap at each other, more often than not.

Ordinarily, Susan would have stepped in and said something, long ago. But I think her fear of the future and her concern for me blinded her. We were all afraid of what we were up against, and Susan and I spent very little personal time together.

Even Zagnut rarely joked anymore. We were consumed. It felt like a mad race to save the world from impending doom. Which it was, of course. The whole "race" and "doom" thing, I mean. But, nevertheless I began to see we were maybe starting to get in a little bit too deep.

It was Friday morning, the day after Thanksgiving. We had just taken off the previous day for Thanksgiving with our families - it had been the first day off in months! Between research and schoolwork, none of us had taken any personal time of any kind. Even when one of us would get sick, which was happening more frequently, we'd still show up for 'work'.

There was no school on Friday, so we had a three day weekend. Everyone was anxious to get an early start, so we all met early at 7 a.m.

Immediately, I noticed the difference. Everybody was easygoing and relaxed. Zagnut had teepee'd Bob the computer. Susan actually thought it was funny. Stuart had grabbed a can of Cheez Whiz from the garage pantry and was threatening to spray Zagnut. Everything was as it should be.

That's when I made my startling announcement.

"I have an announcement!"

They all seemed startled.

The guys immediately ceased their antics, as they thought that I had uncovered some sort of major finding. I looked around the room at each of them as they were focusing on me, intently.

"Undeservingly, for better or for worse, you have chosen me as your leader."

They all nodded. This had been a given since grade school.

"That means, you must do as I say."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Stuart barked.

"I'll tell you exactly what it means, Stuart! Today ... we are going ... to Disneyland!"

They all looked at each other for a moment. Then Stuart jumped up shouting, "Hail to the chief!", and Zagnut started whooping like an Indian.

Susan looked up at me adoringly.

"Wait ... I'm not done. Pipe down!"

They did.

"I want you to take a good, long look at Bob."

As they all turned to look at him, they saw that not only was he covered in toilet paper, there was now also a single, devastating shot of Cheez Whiz across the bow of Bob's metal casing.

"You should be ashamed of yourselves."

Neither Stuart or Zagnut said anything. They both just kept staring at Bob - with that giant, yellow happy face.

*Wait for it ... wait for it ...*

Surprisingly, the initial snickering came from Susan.

"You shot Bob!" she laughed, noting the Cheez Whiz.

It took awhile for the laughter to calm down. Finally I was able to continue. "Listen, guys. Seriously, we need to back off a little bit. This has been way too long overdue. Not only are we going to take the rest of the weekend off, we need to start cutting back on our hours."

Zagnut spoke up. "Ben, that's great and all, but there's too much at stake..."

"Listen." I cut him off. "If we're going to do this, we're going to do this on

OUR terms - and at OUR pace - not Vincent's. Vincent is the outsider. We don't have to play by his rules. We have the home field advantage."

Then Stuart spoke up. "You know, we might actually get better and faster results if we have fresher, clearer heads. I think you're right-on. Okay, I'm cool with it."

Susan was quietly stroking my back, so I knew that she was on board.

"Zag, can you honestly look Bob straight in the face and tell me I'm wrong?"

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The day at Disneyland had been one of the best days of my new life! We stayed until closing time, fireworks and all. After we said goodbye to Stuart and Zagnut, I walked Susan home. We couldn't stop laughing at everything that had happened during that day and night, and we had completely forgotten about everything else. It was bliss and it was wonderful.

We went around to the back of her house, to the backyard; and sat down on a lounge chair by the pool.

It was a cold, November night; but neither of us were the least bit aware of it. The kissing started almost immediately. Within minutes, the cold night had become very heated.

"Ben..."

I wasn't about to reply.

"Ben..."

"Right here." I said, kissing her neck.

"Ben ... we can't."

"We're married."

"It's different."

With my heart still pounding heavily in my chest, I understood - and gave a deep sigh. "I know."

"We need to talk about it, Ben."

I pulled away and looked at her face in the moonlight. "You are so

beautiful."

She placed her hand on my face. "As are you."

"I'm beautiful!?"

Susan laughed. "Yes, you are."

"This is so hard. What are we supposed to do?"

"Ben, we're too young. I'm only 14 years old."

"Are not."

"You know what I mean."

Then we both sighed. We sat back and cuddled together, looking out once again at the stars.

"Vega." I said, pointing it out.

"Uh huh."

"Draconis." I pointed that one out.

"Uh huh."

"We both know that there's only one solution."

"Uh huh."

"It's just so far away."

"I know."

"It's only going to get harder."

"I know."

I thought quietly to myself for a few minutes, and then climbed down upon one knee and grabbed her hand. "Mrs. Davison, I love you with all of my heart. And I want to continue spending the rest of my life with you. Will you marry me?"

"Mr. Davison, I thought you would never ask."

## Chapter 27

I woke up the next morning smelling bacon.

*Elias!?*

I looked at the clock and it was 9:30 a.m., Saturday morning. Groggily I made my way into the kitchen.

"Dad?"

"Just in time, son. I thought that after all the work your mother did on that big turkey dinner, I would make breakfast this morning. Picked everything up myself!"

I looked around and saw there had to be at least ten pounds of bacon AND sausage, two large cartons of eggs, and a 25-pound bag of pancake mix - enough to feed half the city.

"I can see that. Who all is coming over?"

"Huh? Oh, no one. Just us."

"Uh huh." *Ever hear of trans fat?*

There was a knock at the front door.

"Oh, Hello, Susan!" I heard my mom say. "Come on in. Ben's in the kitchen with his father. He's planning on feeding Europe."

"Thank you, Mrs. Davison." she laughed.

When they both walked into the kitchen, Mom immediately began scolding me. "Benjamin Davison, you're not even dressed!"

*Gimme a break, I got a bathrobe on - sheesh!*

"Go get cleaned up this instant! Oh, and why don't you borrow your father's razor. You're starting to look scruffy around the edges. Go on now! Git!"

*My mom just 'gitted' me in front of Susan.*

"They grow up so fast." she said to Susan. "So, Susan dear, why don't we relax in the living room while Ben is getting dressed. You're welcome to stay

for breakfast! We may just have enough."

"Okay, Mrs. Davison."

I grumbled all the way through my shower. And I cut myself with Dad's old, single-blade razor.

*I miss my Gillette Fusion Power razor.*

I eventually joined them in the living room. Susan was looking extremely nervous.

My mom was looking at me approvingly. "Now that looks so much better! I knew there was a nice-looking boy under there somewhere. Oh, dear! You cut yourself. Maybe you can have your father help you, next time."

I rolled my eyes.

"Well, that was a nice chat, Susan. I think I had better go check in on your father, Ben; before he burns down the kitchen."

"What's wrong?" I asked after my mom left.

"I think she knows about us!" she whispered.

"About us ... what?"

"You know...", she said, pointing at her bare ring finger.

"What? I don't get it."

"I think she knows we're engaged!"

I was so sleepy, I had completely forgotten all about last night.

*Engaged!*

Now I was wide awake.

"That's not possible!" I exclaimed out loud.

"Shhh!"

"That's not possible!" I whispered. "We weren't going to even announce it until Senior Year!"

"But the way she was talking to me! She said we made a 'cute couple'!"

Ben, she even said she liked me!"

"She's always liked you."

"Not ... like ... this!"

"I don't think so."

"Ben, I know what I'm talking about!"

"How do you know?"

"Because we've already had this same, exact conversation before!"

"When?"

"Right after we announced our engagement the first time!"

\*\*\* \*\*

All during breakfast I kept eyeing Mom suspiciously, waiting for some clue as to what was going on. But it seemed that she was going to insist on discussing everything under the sun ... EXCEPT what she and Susan had just discussed.

*And dad's pancakes turned out pretty good, I might add!*

It wasn't until we finished eating - and Mom had sent David outside to play, that Dad said, "Son, your mother and I just wanted you both to know that we think it's wonderful how close the two of you have become down through the years. And Susan, you have always been like a daughter to us." My mom just sat there, smiling.

*We both gulped.*

"Thank you, Mr. Davison." Susan replied, quietly.

"Sometimes..." my dad continued, "...when two people have been together for awhile ... as long as you two have ... and you two have certainly been friends for a long time..."

*You don't know the half of it.*

"What your father is trying to say is...", said my mom, "...we know that the two of you have begun to develop feelings for each other. It's been becoming more and more obvious lately. And we think that's wonderful."



Looking down, embarrassed, I wondered if Susan had turned as red as I had.

My mom continued. "But we also wanted you to know that you both have plenty of time ahead of you. You're still very young and you have your whole future ahead of you."

*Wait a minute! Does this mean...*

"Absolutely!" Dad said. "And perhaps someday, after high school ... or college even, if you two still feel strongly for each other ... who knows!"

*Ahh ... so that's it!*

"Mom. Dad." I cut in. "I think I know what you're trying to say. And let me assure you, that we have no intention ... of anything like that ... anytime, in the near future."

Susan nodded, heartily.

"I'll admit, your father and I were very young when we were married. And in our day, it wasn't all that uncommon."

Dad joined in, "But in this day and age, young people should at least get a complete high school education. And a college degree would be even more mature and responsible, in preparing for a future together. Providing for a family is a huge responsibility, son. We just want to make sure that the two of you understand there is no rush or hurry. You need a good foundation to build a strong marriage..."

Mom and Dad both continued on for the next half hour, giving us their wise, sagely, parental counsel. We were so relieved, we just sat there, smiling and nodding. Susan kept squeezing my hand under the table.

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"That was so sweet!" she exclaimed, after we had been excused. "And they were so cute together!"

We were now a couple of blocks from home, walking along the sidewalk hand-in-hand, and having fun quoting my parents. Not that anything they said was wrong, mind you. It's just that Susan and I were, in reality, old enough to be THEIR parents.

*Ah ... the irony of life.*

"Well, I'm glad that's over with."

"Excuse me, Mr. Davison. Nothing is over!"

I was confused.

"Ben, we're engaged! I'm so excited!!" she squealed, as she threw her arms around me.

"Well, sure, but ... geez, Susan ... we're already married!"

"Don't give me that 'we're already married' excuse. I'm your fiancée and you had better treat me like one!"

I stopped and looked at her. With her hands clasped together, she was literally bouncing on her tiptoes! I realized right then and there, that this engagement thing was going to be more than just a mere formality between us.

I think that's when it truly hit me - maybe for the first time - that we really were going to be living our lives over again.

Everything.

And I also realized that I was going to be looking forward to every minute of it.

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"I can't stand it! I've got to tell somebody!!"

"Yeah, right! And watch us get arrested! Isn't there a law against this or something?"

"Stuart and Zagnut! We can tell them!"

"Fine, all right..."

We walked to Stuart's house first, and his parents let us in. We found him lying on his bed, catching up on months of magazines that he had missed reading.

Zagnut also happened to be there. He was playing with Stuart's static electricity plasma ball thingy, having fun making all of his hair stand straight up.

When we walked in, they both stopped what they were doing and looked

up at us.

Susan made the announcement. "You guys, guess what!? Ben and I are engaged!!!"

They just looked at us for a minute.

Then Zagnut said, "You two are so weird."

"Tell me about it." Stuart said, as they both went back to what they were doing.

## Chapter 28

The next several months passed by quickly. I stayed true to my word to keep our research schedule more sane. We maintained a routine of three afternoons a week and Saturdays. Unfortunately, we made zero progress in getting any closer to finding Vincent.

Susan insisted that even though we were married, since we were now engaged, we should start dating.

*Go ahead - just TRY to figure that one out.*

For our first official date, I suggested we go with the classic dinner and a movie. Susan agreed and I told her that I would come by her house on Friday evening at 6 pm. Susan suggested 5:30 instead, because her dad wanted to talk to me first.

"Talk to me? Why? What about?"

"You'll see." she laughed, refusing to reveal any more.

Originally we were planning on walking the three miles to the local movie theater. I arrived at her house about five minutes early and her father answered the door. "Ben, good to see you, son. Come in. Sue said she's running late and will be out in a few minutes."

"Thank you, sir."

We both sat down in the living room.

"So. I understand that you two are planning on going to the movie theater tonight?"

"Yes, sir."

"Alone?"

*Gulp.* "Yes, sir."

"No ... Stuart and Zagnut this time?"

"Uh ... no, sir."

"I see."

*Okay, it's starting to get uncomfortable in here!*

"Son, I'd like to have a little chat with you, if you don't mind. Man to man."

"Y ... yes, sir."

"I know that you and Susan have known each other your entire lives. And along with Stuart and Zagnut, the four of you have all been best friends growing up."

"Yes, sir."

"However, Susan's mother and I ... and your parents too, I might add ... had noticed long ago that you two have always seemed especially close. Even as far back as early grade school."

"Really!? Since grade school?"

"Oh, yes."

"I ... I didn't know that."

Her dad smiled at me.

"Really?" I asked again.

"What I'm trying to say is, we have all known that someday you two might even begin developing feelings for each other."

I nodded, more than a little embarrassed.

"Now you should know, son, that Susan's mother and I like you. We always have."

"Thank you, sir. I ... like you too." *Awkward!*

"You should also know that we have strict guidelines with Susan. The rule has always been, that until she turns 16, dating boys is not permitted."

*Uh oh. This was unexpected. Although, now that I think about it, I kinda remember something about that. It was just so long ago, I guess I had forgotten.*

"However." her father continued. "What we have not told Susan, is that along with your parents, we have decided to make an exception with you. Because we know you so well, we believe that we can trust you with our little

girl."

*Oh gosh, I hope he's not going to try to give me 'the talk'! I wonder if I can crawl under this couch...*

"Therefore, in your unique situation, we are considering lowering Susan's dating age to 15. But only with you."

"I see."

"I hope that we know you, as well as we think we know you, son. I trust that you will not cause us to regret our decision?"

"No. NO! No sir!"

"Good. Let us hope not."

"And ... thank you sir. I won't let her down! I mean ... I won't let you down."

He nodded approvingly.

"Uh ... one question ... if I may?"

"Certainly."

"Uh ... neither Susan nor I will be 15 for two more months.

"That is correct, son."

"So ... about tonight; I guess we should cancel our plans to..."

"Oh, no! Not at all!"

"But, you said..."

"We're going with you!"

"You ... you ... you are?"

"Certainly! We're going to be your chaperones!"

"Our ... chaperones, sir?"

"In fact, we have an extra special treat for you!"

"Oh?"

"Your parents are coming too! It will be all six of us! Kinda like a triple date. Won't that be fun!!?"

\*\*\* \*\*

On the bright side, our parents ended up paying for the pizza, as well as the movie.

As for the movie itself, all three of the female persuasion voted to see "The Way We Were"[\[2\]](#), with Barbra Streisand and Robert Redford.

A chic flick.

I, of course, suggested "Magnum Force"[\[3\]](#) with Clint Eastwood. I mean seriously. Clint Eastwood. Can there be any comparison?

Both our dads enthusiastically and whole-heartily supported my suggestion.

Both our moms were appalled.

"Ben Davison, you are only 14 years old!" exclaimed my mother. "This film is much too violent for someone at your tender age!"

"Bill, just what were you three boys even thinking!?" Susan's mother asked.

"Arthur Davison, I'm surprised at you!" said my mom, scolding my dad.

Even Susan looked at me and said "You are so right, mother! We really are much too young." Then she actually stuck her tongue out at me.

What I couldn't figure out was, was she just playing the part? Or did Susan really just stick her tongue out at me?

And the battle between the sexes began.

As you might expect, the battle didn't last long.

While were sitting inside the theater, waiting for the opening credits of "The Way We Were", Susan and I got to sit next to each other.

Right between our parents.

You know, going on a date with chaperones is bad enough. But having both sets of parents on either side of you is just a whole new level.

We pretty much sat straight up like boards, with our hands folded neatly in our laps. During the entire movie, our parents kept looking over at us and commenting on how cute we were.

And during the kissing and romantic scenes? Both our mothers actually put their hands over our eyes. Seriously. I kid you not.

It was when my mom leaned over and whispered to us that it was okay if we wanted to hold hands. That's when we knew we wouldn't be going on any more dates.

At least until we turned 15.



## Chapter 29

May finally came around, and with it, so did our 15th birthdays.

*By the way, in case you were wondering? 61 years old turning 15 ... it was more than a little anticlimactic, let me tell you.*

All four families had gathered at Susan's house. This year they decided to celebrate Susan and my birthdays, together. They thought it would be 'cute' now that we were officially a couple.

*It never ends.*

My parents completely surprised me by giving me a new set of wheels. That's right. A brand spanking new Schwinn stingray bicycle, complete with banana seat, tall handle bars and an itty, bitty front tire.

Just like I always wanted.

Apparently, long ago and shortly after I had turned fourteen, I had told them that for my next birthday I wanted one; just like what Stuart and Zagnut had.

Of course that was 45 years ago, so I certainly don't remember it. But they most certainly did.

The worst part about it was, they wanted me to ride the thing. In front of everybody!

You know what they say about never forgetting to ride a bike?

IT'S A LIE!

Whoever 'they' were, obviously 'they' had never ridden a bike when they were 61 years old, and had been off of those death traps for as long as I had. Maybe an exercise bike or even a comfortable beach cruiser might have been somewhat reasonable. But this thing was not meant for someone my age.

Actually it was. But you know what I mean.

I nervously mounted the beast and took off like a bat in molasses; slowly and wobbly.

"Geez Louise, Ben, you ride like an old geezer!" laughed Zagnut.

"Scaredy cat!" teased Stuart. "My grandma can ride better than that!!"

Even Susan was covering her mouth, trying not to laugh.

Apparently Stuart and Zagnut already knew that I was getting the bike, so they had ridden their bikes over to the house.

"Come on Ben, let's go try it out in the hills!"

Not far behind Susan's house were some small foothills that were covered in bike trails.

Stuart and Zagnut zoomed on ahead. I looked back at Susan, hoping for some way out of this.

"Have fun!" she smiled. "And be careful!"

*No help there.*

"Don't be too long, honey." said my mom. "Don't forget we still have cake and ice cream!"

*No help there either. It looks like I'm going.*

I sighed and rode off. I didn't break any speed records. When I finally reached the area, they had already begun zooming around the bike trails and jumping over all kinds of bumps and hills. They really looked like they were having fun!

But when they saw me sitting stationary on my bike, they began taunting me, again. Finally, the mockery and humiliation became too great an affront against my masculinity. My fearlessness was instantly rejuvenated as I geared up to show them how much better than Stuart's grandmother I really was.

I was surprised at how quick I was able to get back up to speed. Obviously I was much more used to bike riding back when I was their age. I had just grown so cautious over the years, it took me awhile to shake it off. But soon I was zooming around the hills with them and having a blast.

"That's more like it, old timer!" laughed Zagnut.

"Hey, Ben! Good to have you back!" Stuart joked.

"Hey watch this guys!" said Zagnut, as he flew off of a steep hill and landed perfectly.

"That's nuthin'." yelled Stuart. "Let the master show you how it's done! Yee haw!!!" Stuart had found another hill that was larger and caught himself a whole heap 'o air on his jump.

I looked off to the left and noticed an even higher hill. By now, I was feeling mighty confident. And I can't believe I'm saying this as a 61 year old, but my new bike was actually pretty cool!

I took off towards my hill and prepared for takeoff. Having put some distance between myself and the other two, I couldn't quite make out what Zagnut was yelling at me. Something about this not being a hill?

But of course it was a hill! I was looking right at it! And now I was pedaling as fast as my skinny legs would take me and zoomed straight towards the top of the hill!

"Bonsai!!!" I shouted.

With the wind blowing in my hair, I joyously flew off the top of the hill and into space.

It was thrilling! It was invigorating!! It was exhilarating!!!

It was ... a cliff.

\*\*\* \*\*

When I opened my eyes, I was surprised to see once again that very same exact vampire nurse with her death needle.

*Why is it, I ask you, that every time you open your eyes in a hospital, there is always somebody standing there wanting to take your blood? What's up with that? Don't they realize how rude and even terrifying, waking up like that can be? One of these I days I'm gonna...*

"Ben! You're awake?"

It was Susan. And my mom. And her mom. And my dad. And her dad. And David. And Stuart and Zagnut. And their parents. It was an entire mob.

*Great, now what did I do?*

I couldn't remember how I got there. I tried to sit up. And the mob rushed forward to shove me back down.

"Uh uh, Mr. Davison." said the nurse, shaking her head. "Try not to move

until the doctor gets here."

Which was just as well, because as soon as I had tried to move, I immediately regretted it. Whatever I had done, the extremely sharp pain nearly made me pass out again.

"Uh, why am I here?" I asked the nurse. "Where's the doctor?"

"The doctor will be here shortly. He's taking a look at your x-rays. Then he can answer your questions."

"So, you don't know why I'm here?"

"No, Mr. Davison. That is the for the doctor to determine."

"Then if you don't know if there's anything wrong with me, WHY ARE YOU TAKING MY BLOOD!?"

*Sorry, but I really hate needles.*

The nurse gave me 'the look'.

*Which brings up another point. Why is it that only women give you the look? None of my friends who are guys ever give me the look! My dad never gives me the look! None of my male teachers ever give me the look! Even the school principle never gives me the look! Is there some class somewhere where all women go to, so they can practice the look? 'Cuz it's the same look. Believe me, I've seen it often enough to know.*

"Ben, honey...", said my mom, "...you don't remember crashing on your bike?"

"Oh yeah ... I think so. That's right ... now I do! I remember flying off that cliff! Say, did you guys happen to notice how high I went!?"

"Ooooh!" screamed Susan, angrily. "Benjamin Davison! I cannot WAIT to get you home! You are SO going to..."

Suddenly, Susan caught herself, as she noticed all the adults staring at her in wide-eyed astonishment. Stuart and Zagnut started snickering.

"Actually, Mr. Davison, you won't be going home. Not for awhile, anyway."

Susan had just been saved by the doctor walking in.

"What!!?" I asked in surprise. "Why not!?"

The doctor held up an x-ray for me to see. "It seems that you have broken your pelvic bone, Mr. Davison. Unfortunately, you are not going anywhere for the next couple of weeks at the very least.

"Two weeks!? Here!!!? With ... HER!!!"

The vampire nurse looked at me and smiled an evil smile.

"I'm afraid so." the doctor replied.

He then addressed my parents. "Mr. and Mrs. Davison, this is a VERY dangerous type of injury. I don't know how to stress this enough, but one wrong move could ... well..." the doctor shook his head. "It could be life threatening if any more damage occurs."

There were several gasps at that statement; not the least of which was mine.

"Even the slightest fall right now could be very serious." the doctor continued. "Your son needs to stay in this bed, and not move a muscle for a least two weeks."

"Then can I go home?"

"We'll see, Mr. Davison. We'll take some more x-rays. However I will tell you right now, that even if I consider it safe for you to go home at that time, you will still need to remain immobile. In bed. For at least four months."

"FOUR MONTHS!!!? That's the whole summer!!!"

## Chapter 30

The next four months flew by.

NOT!

I couldn't believe how long it took to get from one hour to the next. Obviously the 'time gods' were playing around with stuff, because there is NO WAY that a single day should ever take that long to complete its cycle.

I was fortunate to escape the evil clutches of the vampire nurse after two weeks. Actually, I need to stop calling her that. While she had fun teasing me the first day, she turned out to be pretty nice to me. She didn't even rat on me when Stuart and Zagnut snuck in a pizza through the back window.

When I got home, all dietary restrictions were lifted, so I suppose that's a good thing. And fortunately, I was permitted to get up and use the bathroom, now. We don't need to go into details about my previous two weeks of indignity.

But that was the only time that I was ever allowed on my feet. The rest of the four months, I had to live in my bed.

Even with the regular, daily visits from Stuart and Zagnut ... and of course, nurse Susan ... each day continued to drag on.

And in 1973, there were no video games. And no DVD or VCR players. And we only had three TV channels.

Of course, the only exceptions to all this boredom were the rare times when the house was empty; except for nurse Susan and I. Those times were ... interesting.

You see, Susan has always had had this tendency to enjoy tormenting me. Especially during our early years of marriage; it was like a game to her. And of course, now it's even worse, for she knows very well the effect that she has on my 15-year-old, male hormones. She's just the type of person who thinks it's fun to make me squirm and go crazy. Which she did every chance she got.

She wasn't trying to be cruel. Actually, I take that back; she really was. But that's just Susan. She's always been the more ... oh never mind.

The problem was, she would sometimes underestimate her own 15-year-old hormones. And THAT's when things would get interesting.

It was the middle of a hot July. Dad was at work and Mom had taken David out for a haircut. Susan had come over to help with the patient. I knew there was going to be trouble from the very the moment that she walked into my room, wearing the infamous blue top and jean shorts.

"So ... how is my patient today?"

"Fine."

"Just fine?"

I nodded. Then I turned over and looked the other way.

"Oh, are we grumpy today?"

"I don't want to talk about it."

"Talk about what?"

"You know what."

"I know ... what ... about what?"

I refused to answer.

"Ben?"

I continued to ignore her.

"Ben!"

Finally, I turned back around and faced her. "Susan, for crying out loud! What do you think you're doing!?"

"Ben, what is it? Seriously, what's wrong?"

"What's wrong!? Are you kidding me!? Susan, look at you! You're standing there all ... hot ... and gorgeous ... and ... bothering and all! Do you have ANY idea how hard this is on me?"

Susan started walking slowly over to me.

*Oh, no. Not good! Not good!*

Then she sat down on the bed next to me.

*Danger Will Robinson! Danger!*

"Did you just call me ... hot?"

Now listen; she's my wife, okay? We were married for thirty years; so you can't blame me for what I did next. It was just the way she said it and it put me over the edge. Before I realized it, I had grabbed her and pulled her over to me, kissing her furiously.

Unfortunately, she began kissing me back just as passionately.

It lasted for maybe thirty seconds, until finally I managed to shove her away, gasping for breath. If I hadn't stopped things when I did...

We both stared at each other in shock.

"Whoa!" she exclaimed in surprise. "Where did that come from!?"

"I don't know. That was powerful. And that was ... close."

Susan nodded in alarm. She stepped back and sat down in the desk chair ... several feet away.

I glared at her.

"I'm so sorry Ben! I'm so, so, so sorry! I didn't mean to..."

"Didn't you!?" I said, angrily.

Susan actually began to get tears in her eyes. "Maybe I did, just a little. But I didn't think..."

"No, Susan. You didn't. For once, you didn't think."

Neither of us said anything for a long time.

"Ben?"

"What?"

"I miss you."

After a long pause, I sighed. "I know. I miss you too."

"How are we going to do this, Ben? How are we going to get through two more years?"

"I don't know. I honestly don't know."



We both sighed.

"Now I know what they mean by playing with fire." she said.

"Now there's an understatement."

Susan looked at herself. "I guess I could start by not wearing this, anymore."

"Well ... maybe you don't have to stop wearing it altogether." I grinned. "Just ... maybe ... not when we're alone. But ... once in awhile couldn't hurt. Could it?"

She smiled at me.

Neither of us spoke again for awhile. It was amazing how long it was still taking to cool down.

"Whatcha thinking about? " she finally asked.

"Burlap."

"Excuse me?"

"You heard me. Burlap."

"Burlap?"

"Yes. As in you wearing it. From now on."

Susan laughed.

# Chapter 31

Finally the end of summer came. Surprisingly, Susan behaved herself. Well, mostly. As did I. Well, mostly. It wasn't easy, especially being idle and all. But somehow we survived.

I finally got paroled about two weeks before school started. I was pretty weak and the muscles in both of my legs had atrophied somewhat, even with the leg exercises the doctor had given me.

But there was a bright side to all of this - Susan and I were now officially old enough to start dating! And that was a good thing. I think. Hopefully we both learned our lesson and we would be a lot more careful and cautious now.

*Yeah, right. Maybe this isn't such a good thing, after all.*

For our official second date, we decided on ... dinner and a movie.

Susan's parents dropped us off at the pizza place, which was just down the street from the movie theater.

And the movie? Magnum Force. It was still playing!

And guess what? She actually liked it! There's this slight violent streak to Susan that can sometimes be a little scary, know what I mean?

As we were walking home after the movie, Susan finally brought up the subject of Vincent.

"In a way, it's been nice since you had that accident."

"Oh?"

"We haven't had to think about ... you know who and you know what."

"You mean Vincent and the end of the world?"

Susan nodded.

I sighed. "You know what? I've been thinking about that a lot. All summer, in fact."

"Really? You never mentioned that you were thinking about him."

"I wasn't thinking about Vincent. I mean ... I've been thinking about NOT

thinking about Vincent."

"You want to try that again?"

"What I mean is ... well, I'm not sure about how to put this."

"Well instead of not 'putting it' like you usually do, just tell me. I'll make sense of it."

"Okay. I'll try." I cleared my throat. "Susan?"

"Yes?"

"I love you."

"Awww. I love you too."

"I mean it. I really love you. I'm head over heels in love with you, all over again. I'm crazy about you! I can't stop thinking about you! Susan, I can't live without you!"

"Ben!"

"I know we've been married and all. But you know what? I'm sorry. I'm really, really sorry. I'm sorry for the way I treated you. After what happened to Stuart and Zagnut ... I'm sorry for crawling into my pity-party shell and never talking to you. I'm sorry I left you alone to deal with that and everything else. I'm sorry for cutting you out of my life. I'm sorry for not sharing my life with you. I'm sorry for everything, Susan. I can honestly understand now, why you left me."

"BEN!!!"

"Let me finish. I need to get this out. This thing that we have; that we've ALWAYS had. This is rare! And it's special!! But I took it for granted a long time ago. And I'm sorry. Susan, you are the love of my life! Do you understand that!?"

She was nodding with tears in her eyes.

"All summer long, I've been thinking. I don't want to die. I really don't want to die! For the first time in a very, very long time, I want to live! I want to live with you. I want to live the rest of my life with you! And I want to grow old with you."

We were both getting teary-eyed now.

"But then there's this whole thing with Vincent..."

"Shhh. I know." she said, putting her finger on my mouth.

But I had to finish it. "Susan, I don't want to. I really don't. Not anymore. I wish there was someone else who could do this - but we both know that there isn't."

"I know, Ben."

"You see? That's another thing."

"What is?"

"What you're doing right now."

"I ... I don't understand."

"Susan, I know ... that you know I have to do this. I can't imagine how hard this must be on you."

It was at this point that Susan finally burst into tears. She had to sit down on the curb, while I held her, letting her weep.

That is when I finally realized how much of a heavy burden this had been on her the whole time. How can a person watch someone they love, head off into harm's way? As I held onto her, I tried to imagine what it would be like for a husband or wife to see their spouse head off to war. Or the spouse of a police officer head into the streets every day? Or a wife kiss her fireman husband as he left their home for some raging wildfire? How could someone do that?

And it broke my heart.

Finally after several minutes, I continued. "I've made a decision about Vincent, Susan. And it's a selfish one."

She looked up at me.

"I've enjoyed not thinking about it, all summer. I've decided that maybe I don't have to be in that much of a hurry."

"Ben! What do you mean!?"

"We'll still keep an eye out for him. And if he shows up somehow, somewhere, then I'll deal with it and do whatever I have to do. But until that

day comes, you are the only thing that matters to me. That's what I meant when I said that I love you."

We quietly held each other for a long time.

"So ... how did I do?"

Susan laughed, while crying at the same time.

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After they walked down the street, a stranger in a dark brown cloak and long white hair stepped out of the shadows and watched them disappear in the distance.

## Chapter 32

The next several months were rather different. Or I should say, non-different. I was now a junior in high school. And for the first time since I came back, I really turned into a high school student!

Last year was just plain weird; with the whole 'going back in time' thing, and Susan my wife showing up, too.

And Elias. And Stuart and Zagnut; and even Bob the computer. All of it. It just wasn't your typical sophomore year in high school, you know? This year, however, things were turning out fairly normal.

Of course, Stuart and Zagnut were still anxious to stay on Vincent's trail. They actually seemed more earnest about it than I ever did. They were still spending a lot of time in my garage.

Susan and I would be in there too, but our minds were usually elsewhere. If you can believe it, this 61 year old man and woman were in la-la land most of the time; we had totally and completely fallen in love with each other all over again.

Stuart and Zagnut, for the most part, tried to ignore us.

I guess I was sort of in denial ... this whole thing with Susan just made me want to try and pretend there was nothing to be concerned about. I was just enjoying being in high school again; and I was content to simply being Susan's boyfriend.

Except, there was a small problem with that last part; the part about being Susan's boyfriend, I mean.

And that problem's name was Veronica.

Now, I remember Veronica. Back in the 11th grade, the first time around? I definitely remembered Veronica.

Susan and I are younger than most of the other kids. Whereas most of them are 16, we're still only 15. For whatever reasons, our parents placed us in Kindergarten early, when we were only four years old. I guess they thought we were smart enough to handle it or something.

So this, of course, makes Veronica an 'older woman'. An older woman who had most definitely taken an interest in me. And Veronica was certainly

someone worth taking an interest in you, if you catch my drift. She had dark hair and dark eyes. And being an older woman just made her all the more mysterious and ... well, you get the picture.

That was the last time around. This time, however, things are different, now. At least for me anyway; because I'm now 61 and a wee bit wiser in the ways of the world.

Veronica was just about the only person who ever made Susan jealous. And not just last time, but this time as well. And I'm talking REALLY jealous.

It was chilling and appalling to hear the things that Susan wanted to do to Veronica. The latest one was something about sliding her down a banister as it turns into a razor blade into a pool of lemon juice ... or something like that.

Susan is a passionate person. On many levels.

Of course, this is all really kinda funny to me, because this time around, I didn't have the slightest interest in Veronica. Susan is my one and only, and nothing or nobody will ever change that. Not to mention as I've said before, they all kinda look like children to me, now.

So one day at lunch, Veronica comes swaying up to us; and she's really laying on the vixen thing a little thick. She's obviously trying to make a play for me, right in front of Susan. Last time, I probably would've been going gaga over her little exhibition.

This time? It was the funniest thing I had ever seen. In front of me is this skinny little sixteen year old girl, trying to look and act like some Hollywood vamp. Frankly I was having a hard time keeping a straight face.

Susan, of course, is absolutely livid. You would think she would be all the wiser and not let it get to her; but there was just something about Veronica that always got under her skin.

Now, I gotta tell you the honest truth; Veronica never was, and never would be, the least bit interested in me. She was definitely way out of my league. She was one of the most popular girls in school and she had the entire football team following her around like puppies. There was only one reason why Veronica was interested in someone like me. And that reason was Susan. I was one of the few guys on campus that didn't fawn over her, so naturally she needed to remedy that.

And this had been going on for weeks now.

"Hello ... Ben." she said, as she played with her long dark hair, giving me her most saucy expression.

Stuart and Zagnut of course, were completely gone. With their eyes wide open and their mouths hanging down, it was very embarrassing.

Susan was turning red with fury. Technically, Veronica hadn't done anything wrong yet, so Susan couldn't get up and flay her alive. But she was certainly waiting for it.

"Hi." I said. "What are you doing ... way over here?"

"Why, Ben? Don't you want me over here? Am I bothering you?"

I smiled. "No, no, it's a free country. Care to join us?"

Susan glared at me in shock.

"Oh, no, that's okay. I just wanted to say 'hi'. Thank you for inviting me, though. I won't forget it. Ben."

Veronica then smiled and sauntered away.

*"Thank you for inviting me, though. I won't forget it. Ben."* repeated Susan after she left. "Ooooooh! I can't believe her!!! Who does she think she is!!?"

"Relax, it's nothing to get worked up over. Right, guys?"

It would've been easier to get them help me out, if their tongues weren't still sitting on the ground.

"What does she got that I haven't got!?" Susan complained.

"You really wanna know?" offered Stuart.

"Shut up." she barked. "Nobody asked you."

And no matter what I tried, I couldn't get Susan to settle down for the rest of the day. The four of us walked home together, as usual. The first stop was Susan's house. All the way home she continued on with her endless tirade about Veronica. Then she slammed her door when she went inside the house. I never even got a goodbye kiss!

We turned around and starting walking home.

"You guys, I gotta do something about this."



"Was she this worked up this last time?" asked Stuart, referring to the last time we had gone through high school.

"Oh yeah. It was a problem all the way through senior year."

"So ... did you and Veronica ... ever...?" asked Zagnut.

"No Zag, we never did. It's always been just Susan and I."

"Really!? You guys never dated anyone else? Ever!?"

"Well, I'll admit there might have been a couple of interesting situations back in college..."

"Really!? Who? You or Susan?"

"Sorry, I ain't telling."

"Ah, come on!"

"Hey, if I said anything, she'd kill me."

"So it was Susan, then! She actually dated someone else!"

"I'm not saying, Stu."

"Then it was you!"

I just shook my head. "Listen guys, all I know is, I don't want to go through two more years of this, like last time. I kept thinking Veronica would back off, but she never did."

"Well introduce me to her!" offered Zagnut. "I'll take her off your hands!"

"Sorry, I don't think so, dufus." argued Stuart. "I'm obviously more her type."

"Knock it off, you morons; none of us are her type. The only reason she wants me is because Susan has me; end of story."

We were a couple of blocks away from Susan's house, when Zagnut stopped to turn around and look back. "She really is upset."

"Tell me about it." I snorted.

"I don't like seeing her like this." said Stuart.

"Guys, what am I going to do? I'm too close to this situation. I can't think of anything. So I need you to think of something."

"What can we do?" said Stuart. "You even said she wouldn't be interested in us."

"Well, that's your assignment, tonight. Operation Veronica. Ask Bob, I don't care. But I need an answer by tomorrow. Got it?"

Suddenly Zagnut started cackling. He whispered something to Stuart, who then started snickering.

"Zagnut?" I asked warily.

"Commander, we are happy to report, that as of tomorrow, Operation Veronica will be 'mission completed'.

I looked at the two grinning idiots. "Care to fill me in?"

"Just don't forget to bring a jar of mayonnaise." laughed Zagnut, as they walked away.

"Oh, and relish too." said Stuart. "Definitely, don't forget the relish."

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The next day at lunch, we sat in our usual spot. Susan spoke with us some during the day, but she was obviously still not herself.

Then, just as Susan was finally beginning to lighten up, it happened. Again.

Stuart was the first to spot her coming our way. "Uh oh, V-girl at two o'clock."

Susan immediately darkened.

"Are you sure you're up to this?" Stuart asked.

"Up to what?" Susan asked me, angrily.

"Ready as I'll ever be. Wish me luck."

Without even looking at Susan, I stood up and began walking towards Veronica.

"What!!? Where are you going! Ben! Answer me!!!"

I ignored her. I knew there was no talking to her when she was like this.

"Stu, where's he going!!? What's he doing!!!?"

"Don't look at me, Susan; it was Zag's idea."

"WHAT was Zag's idea!!?"

"He's gonna ask Veronica to the Winter Formal."

"HE'S WHAT!!!?"

"Shhh! Shut up, I wanna listen!"

Susan was literally shaking with rage.

Zagnut was surprised there was could be so much pudding in one of those little pudding cups. Like the one that had just exploded all over him when she had crushed it in her hand. If he wasn't mistaken, it was butterscotch.

Together, they watched the scene play out. Though they were a short distance away, they could still hear the conversation . . .

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"Hi."

"Ben! What a surprise!"

"So ... how are you?"

"Much better, now that I've finally pulled you away from them and have you all to myself!" Veronica then waved at Susan.

"Well, I just wanted to be alone with you for a minute." Ben said.

"Really!? I'm liking this better and better!"

Ben started scratching his arm. "I ... uh ... I was wondering if I could ask you something."

"Sure, Ben you can ask me anything you want."

Ben started scratching his other arm. "I'm not sure how to ask you this. I mean, gee whiz, you're so pretty and all."

"Oh Ben, that's so sweet! I'm flattered."

Now Ben started scratching his neck. "I'm sort of embarrassed."

"Oh, don't be so shy, Ben. You don't have to be embarrassed around me."

"Well I was wondering..."

"Yes?"

"You probably already have a date for ... you know..."

"A date? A date for what? Ben, are you asking me out on a date?"

Ben started scratching both arms.

And Veronica was starting to notice.

"Well ... uh ... what I was wondering was ... for Winter Formal ... I mean ... do you ... uh..."

"Ben? Are you asking me to go with you to the Winter Formal?"

"Yeah, sure ... I mean ... if you aren't already going with someone else."

"That is just so sweet of you! Really!"

Ben started scratching the front of his shirt. "So, is that a yes?"

"Well Ben, as flattered as I am, I'll have to think about it. You see, I have already been asked by several other boys."

"Oh. I see."

"But I'm not saying no, Ben!"

"You're not?"

"Why don't you ask me again tomorrow? After I have had some time to think about it."

"Uh ... yeah ... okay ... sure!"

"Ben? Are you okay? Is something wrong?"

"Who me? Oh, it's nothing. I just kinda have this ... uh ... skin condition ... sometimes."

"A skin condition? You mean like a rash!?" Veronica was looking more

and more disgusted.

"Yeah. It comes and goes. But I should be fine by the formal. I think."

"What kind of ... skin condition?"

Suddenly, Ben pulled open the front of his shirt and began rubbing at his chest - which was covered in a putrid smelling, puss-like substance.

And he simply stood there, rubbing his chest, watching Veronica running off in the distance, screaming.

## Chapter 33

It was May 1974, and a very special day for the Fantastic Four. Susan and I had just turned 16, and we were all standing in line at the DMV. Of course, Stuart and Zagnut had already turned 16 last fall, so they could have come in sooner. But we always did everything together, so here we are.

The last few months really did fly by, quickly. Susan and I quietly celebrated our one year secret engagement back in November.

Believe me, it was a very romantic evening, if I do say so myself. I took her to a quiet little Italian restaurant. I even gave her a ring! Granted it was just a symbolic ring from a Cracker Jack box. I know that might sound really, really corny to some, but you gotta know Susan. And she loved it.

Of course, next year would come the real and official engagement, along with a real and official engagement ring. Paid for with real and official money. If I could get a real and official job.

The Junior-Senior Winter Formal was also another very romantic night for us. Susan looked so beautiful, it took my breath away every time I looked at her. Sometimes I found myself even having to look away.

And her dress? With her auburn hair? It was that same exact color of blue. You know which color ... the one that matches her eyes? The color that always drives me crazy? And the style of her dress ... with Susan's figure!? Because believe me, by now, she has one. And don't EVEN get me started on that.

Fortunately, we both had the wisdom and the foresight to arrange for her parents to pick us up, right after the formal. It was when I first saw her in that dress and was struggling with pinning on her corsage, that I double-checked and triple-checked with her parents, to make sure that they would not be late. I had a very difficult time concentrating on anything else for that entire night, other than Susan's dress. Luckily for us, her parents arrived on time.

Obviously, we didn't have a problem with Veronica, that night. Or ever again, for that matter. By the way, in case you were wondering? Do you remember how I had mentioned earlier that I hated drama class? Well, I was told that I had earned an academy award for that performance. Although my shirt was a lost cause; my mom never could get rid of that mayonnaise smell.

So now, here we are at the DMV. Freedom was just around the corner! Stuart and Zagnut were both nervous to take their tests. Obviously, I had been

driving for over forty years, so I had nothing to be concerned about.

Susan on the other hand, was more nervous than both Stuart and Zagnut, combined. You already know that Susan is very intelligent and smart. And she is very good at a great many things. Unfortunately, driving a car just isn't one of them.

She had a driver's license for about eight years. After that, I always drove her around or she took a cab. Passing the written tests were never a problem for her. It's just that ... well let's just say it was probably for the best, and leave it at that, shall we?

So, being the veteran driver, I now found myself in the position of trying to calm everybody down as we were waiting for our turns to take the driving portion of our tests.

We had to await the results of our written tests until afterwards, because they couldn't find the right answer sheets or something. It's funny how the DMV didn't know their own answers, without a cheat sheet; but I guess that's beside the point.

Susan by now, is practically a basket case. First, she didn't know if she had passed the written. But the worst part was coming up; she was going to have to drive. Alone. With a driving instructor. Watching her every move!

Now, I've seen her go through this a few times before, and it was never pretty; so I was fairly prepared for it. But Stuart and Zagnut weren't any help, because they themselves were both nervous. In fact, they were so nervous, that they didn't even try to cover it up with their usual, typical macho bravado.

Zagnut went first. Since I was the only calm one, nobody else spoke the entire time that he was gone.

Finally Zagnut returned with a look of shock on his face. He looked up at us, unable to speak. Then he held up a piece of paper. It was his passing slip. Zagnut had officially passed both his tests for his driver's license. The poor guy sat down, stunned.

I clapped him on the back, and both Stuart and Susan congratulated him.

Then it was Stuart's turn.

Again there was silence, as Zagnut was still too surprised to speak.

When Stuart returned, he had a huge grin, held up his pass, and gave us the thumbs up. "When you got it, you got it." He announced proudly.

Again we all congratulated him, as he sat down next to Zagnut in the photo area.

Next it was Susan's turn. I thought for sure that she was going to break down and start crying. I kept encouraging her, telling her not to worry; we could always come back again next week for another try.

She left shaking. She returned ... triumphant!

Somehow, somehow, she pulled it off. I don't know how. I don't know why.

I'm not being critical, mind you. If you ever saw her drive, you would be just as astounded as I was. Personally, I think she somehow managed to charm the instructor. But that's just between you and me. Don't tell her I said that.

Susan sat next to Stuart and Zagnut in the victory circle near the camera. All three were slapping each other's hands.

After I took my test, the Fantastic Four stood up to get their pictures taken. I'm sorry, I misspoke. Make that the Fantastic Three.

It was bad enough that I had failed the written test. But to fail the driving test, too!?

"It's okay, sweetheart." Susan said, encouragingly. "We can come back and try again next week." She wasn't being patronizing or condescending. She was genuinely trying to encourage me. Which made it all the worse. Even Stuart and Zagnut! For they had totally zipped it.

It was hard not to be a poor sport. And I knew that this was a big day for all of them, so I tried to act happy for them. But trust me, I was only smiling on the outside.

Susan never really planned on driving, of course. Even if she did get her license, she had never actually intended to use it. She honestly knew that driving a car just wasn't her thing. She really only wanted that license as a trophy.

So, for the next week, we continued to walk until I took my next test. This time, I wasn't so cocky. I actually studied and prepared. And during my driving test, I was careful to do everything by the book.

It paid off, and I was rewarded with my own driver's license. Of course, Stuart and Zagnut also came to support me, and we all finally celebrated our



newfound freedom by going out for pizza.

It was very gracious for them to wait on celebrating, until I got mine; but that's just how we were. We were very close and we were the Fantastic Four. Once again, I was very grateful for my friends.

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Susan's dad picked us all up from the pizza place, and he congratulated me for passing my test. "It's okay, son. If you want to know the truth, I didn't pass my first time either."

That actually made me feel better.

After he dropped off Stuart and Zagnut, he asked if he could make a quick stop at the hardware store on the way back.

Of course, it was **his** hardware store. Susan's dad owned the largest hardware store in town. We used to love going to visit him when we were little, because there were so many cool things to do, down there. And he always let us play with stuff!

When we arrived, I was surprised to see my parents out in front. I was even more surprised to see the car with a big, red bow on top! It was a navy blue, 1967 Volkswagen square back.

I had never asked for a car. I certainly had never expected a car! The last time around, I had to earn the money for a car, which I didn't get until I graduated from high school.

Why things were turning out so differently this time, I had no idea; this was definitely a major shocker.

Susan's dad was laughing as we pulled up. So was Susan.

"You knew about this!?"

She grinned at me, nodding.

When I got out of the car, I looked at my dad who was holding up a set of keys. I ran over and hugged my parents. "Why!? What ... I don't understand!"

"Son, your mother and I just want you to know how proud we are of you. You have really become a responsible young man, and your grades have improved so much over the last couple of years. We love you son."

I didn't know what to say. Our family wasn't exactly rich. And to buy me a car like this!? I was completely blown away.

"Now Arthur, don't forget..." my mom started to say.

"No, dear; I have not forgotten. Now son, there is one catch."

"I don't care, Dad. You name it! Anything!!"

"All we have been able to afford is a down payment. It will take you about a year to finish paying it off. Plus, we may need some help with the insurance."

"Pay it off? How would I do that? I don't even have a job, yet."

"Well, Ben, that's where I come in." said Susan's dad. "Your father has agreed to let you come and work for me, a couple afternoons a week and on Saturdays; until the car is fully paid off."

"Really!? I could come work for you? Here!?! That would be awesome!!!"

Susan was looking at me, beaming.

"Well, then I guess it's settled, Bill." my dad said, handing me the keys.

"Indeed it is." he said, shaking my hand. "Welcome aboard, son."

I always liked it when he called me 'son'. Especially after we had gotten married. I had always been very fond of Susan's dad. As I've said before, he was like a second father to me.

I opened the door for Susan, and then got in behind the wheel. I turned the key and the engine purred. Then smiling and waving at our parents, we drove off together.

It wasn't a Porsche. It wasn't a hot rod. It wasn't new. It wasn't anything fancy. But it was the best car in the whole wide world.

## Chapter 34

It was a total blast, working at the hardware store; and Susan's dad seemed impressed with my work ethics. But like I said, after working 45 years at 10-12 hours a day, this was a piece of cake. After about three weeks, he began having me lock up at night. By the fourth week, I was running the store all afternoon until closing.

It was during the fourth week, shortly after I had closed everything up, when I finished the race track - and my latest invention. Unfortunately, I was still an inventor at heart, and after hours, I couldn't stop tinkering with stuff while I was alone. On school nights, I couldn't see Susan after work anyway, so I just played around with some of my ideas.

The race track was 40 feet long and ran the entire length of the back wall. My race vehicles, were two belt sanders. Yup, that's right. Each one had long extension cords taped just right to the edges of the track, and I had adjusted their tracking so that they maintained a straight line. That tracking was the hardest part.

Finally, I felt they were ready. I checked the front door and made sure all of the lights were out, except in the back. I certainly didn't want to get caught goofing around like this!

I lined them up and did my first run. Not too bad ... just a couple more adjustments...

I had been into it for about half an hour and never heard the front door open. I was setting up for the fourth run, when I suddenly got the eerie feeling that someone was standing there. I turned around and saw to my horror, it was Susan's father.

Immediately the guilt slammed into me like a sledgehammer. In an instant, a dozen terrible scenes passed before my eyes ... my being fired ... my handing the keys back to my dad ... the hurt and disappointed look on Susan's face...

In fear and trembling I looked up at him.

"How did you..." he asked, incredulously. "I mean ... look at all this!"

I couldn't find the words to respond; I was so ashamed of myself.

Susan's dad slumped down and sat next to me. His next words burned into

my memory such that I never, ever forgot them...

"How did you get them to go straight? I NEVER would have figured that out!"

I was stunned. And my horror and shame turned to sheer joy as we both sat and played with those ridiculous belt sanders late into the night.

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By the time school was out in June, Susan's dad had offered me a full time job during the summer; which I gladly accepted. For there was something else besides a car that I needed to be saving up for.

Christmas was only seven months away, and that's when Susan and I were planning on announcing our official engagement.

I spent the last summer in bed. This summer, I spent in the hardware store. Because I have a natural tendency towards being a workaholic, even Susan's father had to make me ease up sometimes.

But I had several reasons for working so hard; the car and an engagement ring were only two of them. One year from now, Susan and I would be married. And I had to be able to support her. Although she certainly wasn't opposed to working herself; heck, we had done it almost all of our lives.

Last time we didn't get married until after college. Even then, it was hard being married while we continued working towards our Masters and PhDs. Because we couldn't have kids, it was reasonably manageable. Although we often didn't get to see each other, all that much.

But Susan and I already discussed how things needed to happen much differently, this time. One big difference, of course, was that I could not risk going into the same line of work. The idea that someone could use one of my designs and destroy the world, was absolutely terrifying to me! Thus we would be choosing a different path. The problem is, we had no idea what that path would be.

Another big difference, is that this time our relationship would be priority number one, instead of our careers.

The one thing we knew for sure, was that it was getting more and more difficult for us to be apart. We both knew that unfortunately, getting married right out of high school was our only real option, this time around; we weren't going to torture ourselves any more beyond that. We would just have to somehow figure out the rest as we went along.

Maybe working here at the hardware store wouldn't be such a bad thing. All I knew was, I didn't know where I was going. But I was here now; and that's all that mattered.

It was nice for Susan and I to be able to drive around, now, and go to nicer restaurants for a change. Don't get me wrong; I love pizza, if you haven't already noticed. But I mean, come on - we're like 63 years old, now!

Susan was fine with my working as often as I was. As long as I didn't start slipping to back into my old workaholic ways, that is. She understood exactly why I was doing it.

Thus, the summer of '74 went by quickly.

Susan's father was enjoying having more time off. Very much so, in fact. For he had been putting in many hours over the years, as he could never find good and trustworthy help.

In late August, just a few weeks before our senior year was to begin, he stopped by the store on a Saturday about an hour before closing time. "Hey, Ben. Why don't you close up early, today."

"Oh? Why is that?"

"I just thought it might be nice for us to have a chat. There's that new coffee house in town. Do you like coffee, by any chance?"

I gave him a huge grin and we headed out.

*My first coffee in a long, long time. I gotta tell ya, that was one good, smooth cup of Joe. Yessir. It really was. Man that was ... oops, sorry - back to the story...*

While we were sitting there talking about inviting over Stuart and Zagnut for a four-way belt sander race on Sunday, he completely floored me with a question, right out of the blue.

"You and Susan are planning on getting married, aren't you?"

*You know what's worse than something going down the wrong pipe and choking on it? Try scalding hot coffee going down the wrong pipe. Now there's an experience you won't soon forget!*

After the waitress brought me some ice and some rags, Susan's father began apologizing. "I'm sorry Ben, I should've given you a little better warning, I guess. I didn't mean to take you by surprise."

"No, it's okay. Really."

"You know, maybe I shouldn't have said anything. I should've waited until you were ready to bring it up."

"No." I said. "You ... you were right to bring it up."

"So ... I was right?"

I don't know where I got the backbone, but somehow I did. Besides I felt comfortable with him. We were sander racing buddies!

"I want to be honest with you. You have always been very good to me, and I owe you that much. And a lot more."

He nodded.

"I love your daughter. More than anything. More than life itself."

Now he smiled at me.

"And in truth, I've loved her longer than maybe even you may have realized." *I didn't know how else to word that part.*

He raised his eyebrow at that.

"I want you to know ... no ... I NEED you to know ... that this is not a decision that I have made lightly."

"I believe you, son. I know you well enough for that."

"I also understand the responsibilities that go with such a decision. There is much more than just the financial and paying bills. Susan needs security. She needs to feel safe. She needs a place that she can make her own. She doesn't just need a place to live; she needs a home."

He looked at me, marveling at what he was hearing.

"And I understand that there is more to marriage than just the husband and the wife. It's also the joining together of two families."

"Ben Davison, you are the most remarkable young man I have ever known. I must say your maturity and insight ... for someone of your age..."

*I wasn't gonna touch that with a ten foot pole.*

"Although the truth of the matter is, sir, I wasn't planning on talking to

you about this until Christmas."

He just smiled at me knowingly. This is the guy where Susan gets it from!

"But since we're laying all the cards out on the table, sir..."

Now he looked at me very seriously, with his penetrating eyes. And my newfound backbone completely withered away.

"Would you ... sir ... I mean ... would you ... give me your daughter's hand in marriage?"

*I know that back in my future day and age, this unfortunately wasn't exactly a common practice anymore. Although I think it should be. But back here in 1974, it was still somewhat common for a young man to respect his girl's parents enough to do this.*

He looked at me for a long time, pondering what I had just asked of him. The lump in my throat was growing larger and larger. Pretty soon, I didn't think I was going to be able to breathe. I was starting to sweat profusely.

"Ben Davison. There is no other I would rather have, than you as my son-in-law. I am honored that you would ask this of me. And it is my honor to say 'Yes'. Welcome to the family, son."

That was a very emotional moment. For both of us.

We didn't speak for awhile ... we just kinda looked off in the distance.

Dumb, I know. It's a guy thing.

Finally, after the waitress brought us two more cups of coffee, I spoke up again. "You know, there are two more things that I need to ask you." I said, boldly.

He looked at me and nodded.

"The first one is, could I convince you to not say anything about this, yet? As you well know, we're both still pretty young, and..."

"Say no more, Ben. I expected as much. We'll keep this between us. When you're ready to say something, you just let me know."

"Thank you."

"Although I should tell you, son - there's going to need to be some

changes."

"Changes? What kind of changes?"

Then he reached into his pocket and pulled out a check. "This change, for one. I anticipated how our discussion would turn out. Here is your paycheck for this week."

I looked at it when he handed it to me. It was three times what it should've been. "I ... I don't understand..."

"You're overdue for your first raise, Ben. And you've definitely earned it. This raise should not only take care of your car, but also get my little girl a nice ring for Christmas, don't you think?"

"I ... I ... I don't know what to say..."

"And after you and Susan formally make your announcement, you'll be seeing another increase in your paycheck."

I just shook my head at him in shock. At that moment, I was seriously thinking of asking him to marry me, instead of Susan.

"But I don't want you to stay at the store, son."

"I'm sorry?"

"Don't get me wrong; you are welcome to work at the store for as long as you need to. But you have a very good head on your shoulders, son. I mean that with all sincerity. I think you are destined for greater things than managing a hardware store. You won't hurt my feelings when something better comes along. So don't get too comfortable here."

"Thank you. I understand."

We spent the next couple of hours talking about our plans and timetables, and I got some really great, fatherly type of advice.

Finally he asked me. "You said there were two things?"

Just like his daughter, he never misses a trick.

"Yes sir, there is, actually, something else. Something, that I would ask of you."

"I'm listening."



"It would mean a very great deal to both Susan and I, if you would consider throwing those away."

He looked into his shirt pocket, at the pack of cigarettes.

"Your daughter loves you very much." I continued. "And I think I'm falling in love with you too."

He laughed.

"We really want you around for awhile." I finished saying.

He sighed and looked at me for a moment. "I'll consider it, Ben."

I nodded.

"And thanks, by the way, son."

## Chapter 35

It was the fall of 1974 and we were in our final year of high school. Seniors once again! I never told anyone else about the conversation with Susan's father; not even Susan. If I did, everyone else would have known about it, by now. I was waiting until Christmas.

With our minds fully focused on school and new jobs and Christmas engagements and June weddings, Susan and I rarely thought about Vincent, any more. Susan and I had all but completely stopped going to the garage for research. Only Stuart and Zagnut remained vigilant.

One evening in October, as I was getting home from work, I saw the lights on and I really started feeling guilty. When I walked in, they both greeted me warmly. But they looked very tired. "You guys, what are you still doing here?"

Stuart looked up at me. "We had a couple of ideas and we're checking it out. We may actually have a lead."

I sighed. "Listen, guys..."

"Nope. Scratch that." announced Zagnut. "It's not Vincent. It's another dead end."

They both looked disappointed.

"Listen, guys ... I'm really sorry that Susan and I haven't been here helping, lately."

Zagnut held up his hand for to me stop. "Now YOU listen, Ben."

Zagnut looked at Stuart who nodded in agreement. "Don't apologize. We know things didn't go well for you and Susan, last time. And now you two are getting a second chance."

"But Vincent..."

"Forget about Vincent! Me and Stu are on it. Maybe after the wedding and things settle down ... but for right now, you two just need to get it all together. Don't screw up your second chance, Ben. That goes for both of you. Get it right this time!"

"Are you ... scolding me, Zag!?"

"Darn right, I am."

"Remember, this is OUR Susan, too." said Stuart. "Don't blow it with her. So far you're doing okay. We're here to make sure it stays that way."

"Are you guys serious!?"

"You got a problem with that?"

"I ... well ... what if I do!?"

Stuart and Zagnut looked at each other and smiled. Then they crossed their arms and looked back at me. "Don't even think about messing with us."

I sighed. Then I looked at them mischievously.

"Uh oh." said Stuart.

"Stay back, Ben. Don't make me use it!" Zagnut was holding up a can of cheese whiz.

It took over an hour to clean up the mess.

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It was November, and just three days before the Senior Winter Formal, Susan got a very bad case of the flu.

Needless to say, I didn't get to see her in that beautiful, blue dress. Instead, for two weeks, I got to see her in pajamas and a bathrobe.

"Ben, I'm sorry about the formal."

"Nah, don't worry about it. The only thing I cared about was seeing you in that dress."

She tried smiling, but she wasn't looking very good.

"Maybe after you get better, you can give me a private showing?" I teased, sitting beside her on the bed. I was feeling a little bit romantic. I thought she was sitting up to kiss me. Instead she shoved me away and ran out towards the bathroom. She was sick again.

*C'est la vie.*

Stuart and Zagnut walked in. "How's El Sicko?" Stuart asked.

"She's pretty sicko." I grimaced.

They both sat down on the floor.

It had been tradition over the years, that when one of the Fantastic Four would get sick, the other three would always come over, spending all their free time hanging out, just to keep them company.

We even stayed while the other one was sleeping; that's how close we were. We never even thought about it anymore; it's just what we did.

"Hi guys." Susan said when she finally came back. Weakly she climbed back into bed.

"Wow, you look like..." Zagnut didn't finish.

"Yeah, well that's how I feel."

"Well, at least you don't look as bad as Zag did when he had the measles." said Stuart.

I snorted. "You know, it's been almost 40 years for me and I still remember! Dude, you looked like a pomegranate with red hair!"

Susan started laughing, and we began reminiscing about all the times we had each gotten sick over the years. It was only a short time before the conversation turned extremely disgusting as we tried to out-gross each other.

I went into the kitchen to get her something to drink, when her father joked with me.

"Better get used to this." he chuckled.

I just smiled at him and left. But I was torn up inside, for I knew he was thinking about more than just Susan getting sick with the flu.

*He was so good with kids, too!*

Because Susan and I wouldn't be able to have children, it broke my heart that he would never be able to see grandkids.

I decided right then and there, that Susan and I would need to take the adoption thing seriously, this time. No putting it off like we did before. I knew Susan wanted kids. So did I. But for some reason, I had always seemed to be the holdup. As soon as I knew that I could support a family, this was something else I was determined to get right this time.

## Chapter 36

It was December 22, 1974. I had made all the necessary arrangements and preparations. Now before I tell you what I did, you gotta keep something in mind, else it might not seem as meaningful.

By now you already know how close the four of us were. And you also know how close all four families were. We got together nearly every week for some thing or another; we were really like one giant family.

And what's even more amazing? We all actually liked being together! Unusual for teenagers, especially, I know. Maybe there is something to that old African proverb: 'It takes a village to raise a child.'; I don't know. But at least with our four families, it certainly fit.

I told Susan that I wanted to take her out for a special, romantic Christmas dinner at our favorite Italian restaurant. The only condition was, she had to wear that blue dress.

*Actually she didn't have to ... that was just for me.*

Of course, she acted all innocent, like she had no clue. That was one of the hardest things about Susan - she was too smart for her own good. It was next to impossible to pull anything over on her. But I figured that at least she wouldn't know HOW it was going to go down.

We pulled up to the small hilltop park overlooking the city.

Ordinarily, if a person was expecting a special Christmas dinner at a nice restaurant, they might say something when you didn't pull up in front of a restaurant. Susan just remained nice and quiet, commenting on how pleasant the weather was for December.

I didn't even bother trying to come up with an excuse. I mean, what's the point?

I got out and opened the door for her, and helped her out of the car. Then we slowly began walking through the park, neither of us saying a word.

But I succeeded in getting my first gasp out of her, when we rounded the corner and she saw the lights, the white table with all the white decorations, sitting beneath a white canopy with white ribbons.

"Ben!"

I smiled. So far, so good.

Out in the parking lot was a generator providing all of our electricity for the evening, including heaters if needed.

As I sat her at the table, I very much enjoyed the look of wonder in her eyes at the whole scene.

Which, of course, then turned to surprise, when she heard the music. She turned to look at the source of the music, and laughed.

Stuart and Zagnut were wearing white tuxedos. Stuart had setup his home stereo with a stack of albums on the ready, while Zagnut was standing with a white cloth over his arm.

"Welcome to our humble restaurant, mademoiselle. Where we offer the finest in Italian cuisine. "

Susan laughed, again. "Mademoiselle is French, you dork!"

"Pardon moi." he said.

Susan giggled.

"Would the lady care for an appetizer before she begins?"

"Uh, okay. Do I have choices?"

"Might I recommend the Shrimp Renato? I hear it is not only fabulous, it is also all we have."

Susan giggled again. "Thank you, that would be fine."

"How about you, sir?"

"I'll have the same please." I laughed. Zagnut was obviously enjoying his role.

Zagnut looked up and clapped his hands twice.

Stuart quickly started up the next record, which was classical Italian opera. Then he came over to us and bowed. He was our wine steward, as well as the DJ, and began pouring us each a glass of wine.

Except it wasn't wine; it was sparkling cider. We weren't old enough for wine.

Zagnut disappeared and then returned shortly with our appetizers.

And of course, the rest of the dinner turned out perfectly, as everything had been catered by the restaurant personnel who also remained hidden in the parking lot.

Stuart and Zagnut provided the best service imaginable, as they kept us laughing with their antics.

For the main event itself, as tempting as it was, I had decided not to try and get too inventive. Instead, I would keep it simple, thus making it more romantic.

After Stuart and Zagnut cleared the table, they quickly disappeared.

Susan was simply sitting there, looking out at the city lights. I rose to my feet and gently touched the back of her hand. It took her several moments, but she finally turned her head towards me. There were tears in her eyes.

*Geez, I haven't even asked you yet!*

She slowly rose to her feet and we walked a short distance from the table area. Then we stopped and I faced her, holding her hands. We looked into each other's eyes for a long time.

Then, finally, I knelt down upon one knee.

I could feel her shaking. *Never mind her shaking, I could feel myself shaking!*

I opened the small box, and showed her the ring. Once again I scored another gasp.

"Susan, with all of my heart, I pledge you all of my love, for all of time. Will you marry me?"

She looked at me for a brief moment, and then burst into tears as she threw her arms around me.

*Even down on my knee she wasn't taller than me!*

She hung on tightly, for dear life. Finally after a couple of minutes, I had to remind her. "I'm still waiting for your answer."

"Yes." she whispered in my ear.

*This won't do.* "I'm sorry? I didn't quite hear you."

"Yes, Ben Davison, I will marry you." she said quietly, still holding tightly onto me.

"I'm sorry, I still didn't hear you."

"YES! BEN DAVISON! I WILL MARRY YOU!!!" she laughed out loud.

That was all that was needed.

Susan just about jumped out of her skin when the bushes came alive! A whole mob of people leaped out, shouting and cheering! Everyone was there.

"Gotcha!" I said to her, quietly, as I kissed her.

\*\*\* \*\*

It was nearly midnight, before everyone finally left.

Except for Stuart and Zagnut. Part of the arrangement was that they weren't going to clean up or 'close up shop' until after Susan and I had left.

Susan and I were sitting at the table looking at the city lights again. The fog had begun settling in and it was getting chilly; but it didn't bother us. Stuart and Zagnut continued to check in on us on occasion to see if we needed anything. Susan couldn't stop looking at her ring. Earlier, I told her about everything. About my talk with her dad months ago, about the pay raise ... all of it.

"I still can't believe it! I mean ... sure I expected it when you said you wanted to take me to dinner. But, Ben! Everybody knew about tonight before I did! I mean ... everybody! I was the last one to know!!"

"Gotcha." I said again. I must have said that a dozen times already.

"You think you're pretty smart, don't you Mr. Davison?" Susan grinned. "Pretty proud of yourself, are you?"

"Well ... it's not easy to pull a fast one on you, Mrs. Davison."

"Ben, this evening was so wonderful! You worked so hard on all this! You made it magical for me. Thank you. I love you so much!"

We cuddled together for awhile.

"Yeah, I guess I am pretty proud of myself. This time, every detail was



planned out."

"Almost." came the voice of our wine steward who had sneaked up behind us. He refilled our glasses with sparkling cider.

"And Stu..." Susan said. "You guys really outdid yourselves."

"Uh ... Susan? They're over there."

Susan looked over to where I was pointing. Stuart and Zagnut were standing about thirty feet away, staring at us.

Actually, they were staring at the wine steward behind us. In an instant, we knew.

"ELIAS!!!!" Susan practically leaped out of her chair as she threw her arms around him.

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The five of us talked until three in the morning; and not a word of it was about 'you know who'.

If Susan thought the night was magical, this was the guy who made it all possible. And now it truly was magical!

Elias enjoyed himself immensely, as we brought him up to speed over the last three years. He laughed at Stuart and Zagnut's stories and accounts, as they acted out everything. He especially enjoyed the one about Veronica; he had to hear that one twice. He loved Susan's exuberance, and he was quite proud of the changes in me, and the decisions that I had made. He must have asked to see Susan's ring five or six times.

It was really good to see him. And we could tell that he was glad to see us, as well.

It was a bittersweet time, though, as he said that he had to leave, right away. He only had enough time to stop by and congratulate us on our 'official' engagement.

Of course, how he knew about this night was a total mystery, and one that we never did find the answer to. But he left us on a high note, promising that he would see us again soon, and that he wouldn't stay away as long this time.

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Standing on her front porch, I stepped back while making her turn around for me, one more time. I wanted to remember her in that dress for a long, long time.

We kissed our final kiss, then she yawned and turned to go inside the house.

As I drove away, I sighed.

I sighed because of how well the night had turned out; much better than I had anticipated.

But I also sighed, because of what Elias had said at the end. I was fairly certain that Susan didn't catch it, but I did. He said he would be seeing us again soon.

Which could only mean one thing.

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Of course, Susan had picked up on it.

But like the nightmares, she wasn't going to say anything.

## Chapter 37

It was a sunny Easter Sunday morning in April, just a couple of weeks before Spring Break, when Stuart and Zagnut came up with their great idea.

Remember those hills out behind Susan's house? With all the bike trails and the cliff of death? Why not try taking my Volkswagen Squareback out there! I mean, dune buggies are made out of Volkswagens, right?

Susan and the four Moms were spending the major part of the morning setting up for an Easter turkey dinner over at her house that afternoon.

So we had some time to kill. It was brilliant! A little off-roading with the guys ... it would be a blast. So the three of us jumped in and took off for the hills!

The hills covered nearly a hundred acres and were surrounded by a winding chain link fence to keep people like us out. Fortunately, we knew of one small section on the far side where the fence had fallen and we could drive right on through.

It took us awhile to maneuver the car through the terrain to that far section. My little VW wagon didn't seem to be as 'off-roadable' as I had expected it to be. We got stuck a few times and we had to push it out of some ditches and crevices, but we were determined to make it. Fortunately our determination paid off and we reached the area of entry.

Whooping and hollering, we drove over the downed fence and the large 'Keep Out' sign, and then up into the hills and along the various trails. Of course, we were very careful this time to make sure we didn't drive off of any cliffs. That would not have been very smart now, would it?

Surprisingly, the car didn't do too bad. Sure we almost tipped over a few times, but we always managed to pull it through, just in the nick of time.

Normally, you would think a person might be a little alarmed about the danger of what we were doing. And if I was by myself, perhaps I might have actually have been a little more alarmed. In fact, I probably never would have gone out there in the first place.

Actually ... I guess maybe I probably would have. Never mind.

But nevertheless, I have found over the years, that it really helps to have a couple of guys along, like Stuart and Zagnut. Their companionship and advice

really helps ease the tension, and minimize the fear and anxiety that one might otherwise experience in situations such as this. In fact, it was only with their continued counsel and guidance, that we were able to fully enjoy ourselves without the least bit of worry or concern.

I remembered what Elias had said to me, years earlier. *"There is wisdom in a multitude of counselors."* Surely this is what he had meant!

If we happened to find ourselves on the steep side of a hill and starting to flip over, why all we had to do was quickly move ourselves to the opposite side of the car, and the redistributed weight would be enough to help get the car past the danger area. We had it all worked out.

And it really was a lot of fun!

We were out there for over an hour, when we decided that it was probably time to start heading back.

Of course, the main reason we decided that, was because we had reached a spot where we couldn't go any farther. We were on the side of a very steep hill and the car was already sitting at a 45 degree angle. We were all pushed against the driver's side of the car, looking out the passenger windows ... which looked to us to be almost straight down.

Driving at the speed of about one inch per hour, we wisely decided that we shouldn't attempt going forward any more, as the whole car would begin to slide, when we did so. So ... I put it in reverse and tried backing up.

Unfortunately, the car began to slide, again. It didn't matter if we went forwards or backyards, the car just seemed determined to want to slide down towards the unpleasant looking ravine, below us.

We sat there for several minutes trying to decide what to do. We couldn't even move! We had to remain frozen, else the car would tip over. And flipping down the hill seemed less desirable than sliding.

Fortunately we didn't have to choose, as the car finally made the decision for us. It chose option A, which was sliding down towards the ravine.

We began to loudly express ourselves as we quickly picked up speed in our slippery descent. Suddenly at the very last moment, the car stopped dead in its tracks, just before we plummeted over the edge. It was a small section of chain link fence that had saved us.

We continued pressing ourselves against the driver's side, as we could still feel the car wanting to tip over and rip through the fence. And that would not

be a good thing.

Two hours later, we were in great pain and suffering from cramps, as we had to continually keep pushing against the driver's side of the car. We couldn't move, because it would make the car begin to rock. And we certainly didn't want that! We were stuck there, and believe me, it was excruciating.

Suddenly, we heard a noise. It almost sounded like a helicopter! And then I saw it, out my front window. Slowly approaching us was our salvation! Sort of. It was a helicopter, all right. But it was the Channel 5 News helicopter.

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Susan was decorating the cake she had been working on all morning. She was a great cook, and she absolutely loved designing cakes. She was very proud of her latest colorful creation with Snoopy and Easter bunnies, and couldn't wait to show it off later at the party. She was also practicing ideas for her wedding cake, which she would obviously be designing, herself.

"Susan?" called her mom from the living room. "Can you come here for a minute?"

"Be right there!"

Susan washed her hands and then walked into the living room, where she found the four moms looking at the television. They had only recently gotten cable TV and now had access to all sorts of channels.

And there they were, in all their glory, partly hanging out the windows of Ben's car, sitting on the side of a steep cliff overhanging a small canyon.

Laughing and waving at the camera.

\*\*\* \*\*

You know what I find most interesting about jail cells? They are designed for your protection. Everything is made out of stainless steel, and there are no sharp corners. Even the bolts are rounded off. So you really can't get hurt.

Especially from visitors.

Which in our case was very helpful, for there was one small visitor in particular who was continually threatening us with serious bodily harm every few minutes. Even our jail officer shuddered at some of the things he heard.

"Please officer, do we really have to go, now?" I pleaded. "Can't we stay

here just a little while longer? Isn't there something you can do?"

We all knew that it was much safer behind bars.

The officer actually looked like he felt sorry for us. "I'm afraid not, son. Once your parents posted bail, we can't legally hold you any longer."

And so, like prisoners heading for the guillotine, the officer opened our cell door, and we slowly walked out in single file. Then the officer opened the door leading from the jail area into the front lobby of the small police station.

"Good luck, gentlemen." he said as we filed past him. It almost sounded like I heard snickering, just as he closed the door behind us.

I'm not going to get into all the details about what happened next. Let's just say it's not for the faint of heart, and I don't want to appall or upset any younger readers; it could scar you for life.

My parents did something unusual this time, and decided to stay completely out of this one. Since we were getting married in a couple of months anyway, they decided to let Susan handle it.

I would have preferred it the other way around.

The car had also been rescued, although there had been a lot of damage. It would be in the body shop for weeks.

## Chapter 38

It was only three days later, when Zagnut announced that he had finally found Vincent. Actually, some credit goes to Bob.

Zagnut gathered all of us into the garage.

"Anton!"

"Anton?" I said. "What are you jabbering about, Zag?"

"He's going by the name, Anton! Not Vincent. Anton Cen Vescuinte."

"Anton Cen Vescuinte?" Susan asked.

"Zag, is that one of your stupid anagrams?" complained Stuart.

Zag had been experimenting with anagrams on Bob for several days now. Stuart thought it was a waste of time, but Zagnut insisted on trying.

"That's exactly what it is!"

"Awww!" Stuart whined. "Zag, you've gotta be kidding me!"

"Listen, we haven't been able to find anything on Vincent Atonescu. We even agreed that he might be going under a different name. So Bob has been feeding me all of these different anagrams based on Vincent Atonescu, and that's how I discovered this Anton guy."

"Zagnut, he's smarter than that! Nobody's going to turn their name into an anagram! They only do that in the movies! Nobody's stupid enough to do anything that corny!"

"I am ... stupid enough ... that is." Zagnut stated proudly.

Zag's real name is Harold Deluce Guntaz. He got teased a lot as a kid and hated that name. It had actually been Susan's suggestion that he come up with a cool nickname. Stuart happened to be eating a Zagnut chocolate bar, saw it was an anagram of Guntaz, and suggested it as a joke. The rest is history. To this day, I've never understood why Zag thought 'Zagnut' was a better choice than Harold. To each his own.

"Ah ... okay, you've got a point ... I think." I said.

"Look, you guys, it's all here! This Anton dude began working for IBM in

Mexico City on June 6, 1971, as Office Manager's Assistant in their corporate Marketing Department. Fourteen months later, August 12, 1973, he gets promoted to Regional Manager of International Affairs for all of South America and Mexico. Fifteen months later, December 17, 1973, he gets transferred to the U.S. in the Dallas, Texas facility. His position? Assistant to the Director of Human Resources. Then, just last year, on May 22, 1974, he gets transferred to one of IBM's main research centers in Almaden as their Operations Manager."

"Where's Almaden?" Susan asked.

"San Jose." I answered. "California."

"So tell me," Zag continued. "How does a lowly, Mexican immigrant out of nowhere, get promoted to IBM's main research facility ... here in the United States ... as head of Operations, no less ... in the span of three years?"



## ~ Demons ~

## Chapter 39

The small Indian woman stopped for a brief respite from her hard day of labor. The hot Baja sun had burned away most of what little energy she had left. Wiping her brow, the cool breeze that had just begun blowing was a blessing.

She worked alongside her husband and two sons on their farm, just as every other day since they arrived. It was only the four of them, and their farm was many miles from the nearest settlement or town.

Her husband paused what he was doing. "Are you okay, wife?"

"I will be fine. I only need to rest, but a moment."

He looked up at the position of the sun, noting that it was quickly heading towards the horizon. Also feeling the fresh breeze, he said, "The day is nearly over. You two take your mother home. I will finish."

"Okay, Papa." replied the older son.

The woman smiled thanks to her husband, and began collecting her things.

After they had gone some distance, he yelled after her, "I will cook!"

She turned around and yelled back, "And I will thank you!"

The father was grinning broadly as his family turned back to head towards their simple home.

Two hours later, it was sundown as the father entered the doorway. It was a small, two-room shelter made of tin and wood, with a thin curtain separating the rooms. The front room had a small, stone fire pit for preparing meals. His two sons slept in this room; the back room was for he and his wife. After the harvest, he would have time to build a more suitable home.

Seeing no one in the front, he walked to the small, back room. His younger son was playing with a lizard he had caught in the corner. His wife was removing the wrappings from their elder son. "He has not yet healed." she said. "He should not be laboring."

"Son, are you strong?"

"Yes, Papa."

"How strong?"

He pulled away from his mother who wasn't finished with him. Reaching down, he picked up the large stone he had been practicing with every day. He grunted, but was able to lift the stone above his head. With a grin, he announced, "I am very strong! I am stronger than you!"

"You see, wife!?" the father said, proudly.

She pulled him back to continue replacing his wrappings. Shaking her head, she repeated, "He is not yet ready."

"Bah!" His eldest son was almost a man now. He was ready.

But as his son turned back around towards his mother, he frowned at the large, bright red scar.

Suddenly, there was a knock on their door.

They looked at each other, nervously. She hurriedly finished the new wrappings, then ordered the boys to stay. She held the rifle as her husband opened the door.

In the doorway stood a tall man in a dark brown cloak. He had long white hair, and carried a staff.

"Señor Elias!" they both greeted in surprise.

Elias smiled at them. "May I come in?"

"Certainly! Please! Come, sit down!" the mother said.

"We were about to prepare our evening meal, Señor Elias." said the father. "We do not have much, but would you join us?"

"Thank you. You are very kind."

As Elias began to sit down, the father turned around to prepare the fire pit. He gasped - as did his wife. Though the fire pit was still cold, there was a fully-cooked meal of roasted goat, complete with onions, cilantro, and tortillas.

And bacon.

"Señor!"

This wasn't the first time this had happened. But it was always a shock,

just the same.

"Shall we eat?" Elias said, smiling.

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After dinner, Elias spoke what they had feared to hear. "You know why I am here."

The mother looked down. "Yes. But I did not think it would be so soon."

"We had an agreement."

"Yes. And we are grateful to you." said the father.

"If it had not been for you..." the mother began, but was unable to finish.

Elias gave her an assuring smile. "The boy shall be safe with me."

The mother looked up at him, with tears. "We trust you, Señor Elias."

The father nodded in agreement.

"Does he know?" Elias asked.

"He knows." replied the father.

"How long will you be gone?" the mother asked.

"I do not know."

After a short time of silence, Elias spoke again. "But I shall make you a promise. I shall personally see to it that your son returns to continue his pursuit of ... Monica? If I recall?"

The father grinned and pushed his blushing eldest son over onto his side.

Elias looked at the boy. "Come, Ramón. There is something very important we must do. We leave tonight."

## Chapter 40

Beginning that VERY same night that Zagnut had first found Vincent, I started having problems sleeping. Terrible dreams about the end of the world, and how it was all my fault. All because I wanted to 'play house' with Susan, instead of taking responsibility for what I knew needed to be done.

It was around midnight the following Friday night, when I knew I wasn't going to be able to sleep. This may sound strange, but it felt like something was calling to me.

Because my car was out of commission for awhile, my parents had graciously allowed me use of Mom's car - on the weekends only - with obvious conditions and restrictions attached - such as keeping it on the city pavement at all times.

I dressed and quietly climbed into the car. Not wanting to wake anyone up, I left the lights off until I was a block away.

I drove for several hours, until I finally reached my destination. It was still dark out, when I stepped out of the car, and began walking around.

There was a patch of trees and brush near a full-running creek. The canyon looked so different without my cabin there. I sat down in the dirt that had once been my home for a decade, and began remembering that strange night from three years ago, with the darkness and eerie green light and ominous winds.

I recalled the true reason why I had been sent back here. It had never been about making things right with Susan; though I was very grateful that I had been given that chance. Rather, it was about saving the world.

And likely losing my life in the process. Elias, himself, had even insinuated that I probably wouldn't survive the confrontation with Vincent; I knew that going into it.

I wrestled with my thoughts for a long time.

When I first came back three years ago, I thought I was merely choosing how I would be ending my life: alone in a canyon as a bitter, old man; or saving planet earth from a terrible fate. I never once considered that I might actually want to continue living! I had already led a full life. And this would have been a very cool way to wrap things up.

But then Susan came back. What's worse, I had fallen in love with her all over again. And Stuart and Zagnut were back. And our families. The fact of the matter was, I had fallen in love with LIFE all over again.

And now ... three years later, I had allowed life to distract me from what I was supposed to be doing here, in the first place.

Eventually the sun arose while the entire canyon was encased in fog. I felt very much alone out there; more alone than I have ever felt before in my life.

I agonized over the decision that I knew I had to make. And while I was tempted to accuse life of being unfair, in truth I knew that it was just the opposite. Life had given me a Second Chance. Instead of dying a lonely, miserable hermit, I have been able to spend my final three years ... the happiest and most precious years of my life ... with those whom I loved.

This was indeed a 'rare gift of unspeakable value'.

With the light of dawn, I found myself being very grateful to life, and the Second Chance I had been given. I was also very grateful to Elias for the gift and the opportunity to make things right with Susan. I knew I had made the right choices this time. If I had to do it over again, I wouldn't change a thing.

I had never been able to say goodbye to Stuart and Zagnut the last time, or tell them how much I loved them. I had never been able to say goodbye to my little brother, David. I had never been able to say goodbye to Susan, really. But this time I would. I would make sure I told everyone how much I loved them dearly, and how much they meant to me. This time I would have closure.

By noon, I was finally at peace with myself.

As I started driving back home, I began preparing myself for my last and final days on earth.

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I arrived late Saturday afternoon. I could see all the lights were on in the garage, so I nervously walked over and opened the door. Susan, Stuart and Zagnut were all there, looking at maps and Encyclopedias and making all sorts of copious research notes. Only Stuart and Zagnut looked up at me. Susan continued writing, ignoring me.

"So ... where have you been all day, dude?" asked Stuart. "You didn't tell anybody ... we had no idea where you went!"

I sighed. I had no idea how to put it all into words.

"We covered for you." said Zagnut. "We told your mom you were out looking for apartments for you and Susan."

"Listen, guys ... I'm sorry I didn't say anything..."

"Susan said you needed some time to think about things."

*I guess it wasn't that hard to put into words.* "Uh ... yeah ... that's pretty much it."

We all looked at Susan who was still ignoring us, while making her notes.

"But dude ... you were gone all day!" said Zagnut. "We were worried!"

"Yeah, I know. Again, I'm sorry. It was kind of a spur of the moment, thing."

"So ... where'd you go?" asked Zagnut.

"Actually ... I left around midnight. I drove out to the canyon where I used to live."

Susan dropped her pen on the floor. But still she said nothing.

I sighed again. "Susan, I..."

She held up her hand to stop me. But she wouldn't look at me. "I know, Ben. And I understand." Then she picked up her pen and went back to her research.

"So, this is it then, isn't it?" asked Stuart.

"But what about..." Zagnut started to say.

"Zag..." Susan interrupted, "...we need to put all the wedding plans on hold right now, like I told you. I don't want to hear any more about it, okay?"

"Susan, I..."

"I know, Ben." she said, finally looking at me. "Me, too."

"Yes, Stuart. It's time." I said, looking back at Susan.

"D-Day." said Zagnut quietly.

# Chapter 41

Vincent was restless. The nightmares had returned. He had gone weeks and had all but forgotten about them, but they returned again last night with a vengeance.

He had absolutely no remorse for the many lives he had taken.

Except ... there was that first one. The nightmares always began with that one.

That stupid little Mexican-Indian girl Monica, wandering around his home like a ghost, calling out for her poor, lost Ramón. Then the other dreams would follow. His father and mother, laughing at him. And the others, accusing him.

Vincent was haunted by his demons. But it was always the final nightmare that left him terrified.

Fallow. It was the eyes. He remembered the scene vividly . . .

*As Fallow toppled over dead by his blade, his eyes pierced Vincent. Vincent couldn't stop staring at Fallow's fallen corpse - looking up at him - smiling.*

Vincent had now gone three days without sleep, out of fear of more torment.

Drugs helped. Alcohol only made him groggy.

It had been three years since he had launched his 25-year master plan. So far he was ahead of schedule. His Dehomag connections had paid off, helping him reach his goals faster than expected. Of course, most of them were no longer alive, as he couldn't afford to leave a trail.

Soon he would be finished with IBM, as he had nearly finished establishing his infiltration teams in all of the key areas within the huge organization. He had a laundry list of new, hi-tech organizations that had only recently begun sprouting up around the Bay Area.

It was his belief that this entire region would soon become the tech capitol of the entire world.

And he would be ready.



## Chapter 42

"Thank you, Señor Elias."

"Excuse me?"

"I have never said thank you. For finding me. For saving me. For what you did for my family. I just wanted to say thank you."

Elias smiled at Ramón, but didn't say anything. They had been riding for three days, and Elias had kept a slow pace for Ramón's sake.

"Not to sound ungrateful, but why won't you tell me where we're going?"

"Because I never lie."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means I have but two choices left. One is to tell you the truth. The other is to tell you nothing. If I told you the truth, you would not still be here."

"That bad?"

"I am afraid so."

After some time, Ramón spoke again. "This has something to do with Vincent, doesn't it?"

Elias said nothing.

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They reached San Vicente the following day.

"I need to pick up some additional supplies." Elias said. "I believe there is someone right over there who wishes to see you. Meet me back here in one hour."

Ramón grinned and ran off.

After an hour had passed, Monica returned with Ramón to see him off.

"Hello, Señor Elias." she said.

"Hello, to you too, young lady."

"What!?" Ramón exclaimed. "You two know each other!?"

"You might say that." Elias said. "Here!" he yelled to the stable master, who was leading not two horses, but three. "Oh, did I not tell you? She is coming with us."

## Chapter 43

"Aw, come on Ben, at least just think about it, would ya!?"

"I have thought about it, Stu. And the answer is still N-O no!

"Oh, be reasonable!"

It was about Bob. It was always about Bob. Why did it always have to be about Bob?

It's now the following Saturday morning, and the beginning of Spring Break. We finally know where Vincent is. And we're totally free for the next nine days to finally do something about it! So what have we been doing up until now? Arguing about what to do about it.

For starters, there's the car issue. And the issue is: right now we don't have one. Obviously mine's out of commission for awhile. Stuart and Zagnut still don't have a car yet, and our parents need their cars during the week.

So how do we even get to the Bay Area? We can't drive. I'm not old enough to rent a car; you have to be eighteen. And I really can't afford to be buying four airplane tickets right now. I've already put down first & last month's rent plus security deposit to reserve our new apartment. It's only a few weeks until the wedding, and Stuart and Zagnut refuse to allow us to spend any of our home starting money.

*Even though I don't think we'll be needing it.*

So, what other choices do we have?

*"Say, Mom & Dad, would you mind dropping us all off in San Jose, this weekend? We need to track down a killer mad scientist bent on world domination. It's just for a few days!"*

Stuart and Zagnut suggested we tell our parents that we're going to the beach house for the week, and then sneak away.

Okay, so even if we did try to pull something like that off, we still don't know how to get there. And where would we live? How would we eat? Assuming we don't all die painfully and horribly, what about a change of clothes? How would we get back? How do we explain our absence if we get caught? An awful lot of things to consider.

So the idea keeps cropping up to exploit Bob the computer. I mean, nothing like him will even exist for two more years, when the Apple I comes out.

Of course, by now everyone is well aware of 'The Clause'. You know... "*I cannot use my retained knowledge for personal gain - be it power, fame or fortune.*" etc., etc., etc.

Susan swears Elias never mentioned anything about 'The Clause' to her. But she admits that she was also pretty wacked, so maybe she just missed it.

So far, I've done okay with 'The Clause'. Even Bob doesn't count, because he's being used only to help in our fight against Vincent, not for power, fame or fortune.

Well ... except for Stuart using Bob to help do our homework for the last three years; but we figured that's pretty much a gray area.

And that brings us to our next argument.

We've always known that Bob could make us rich. So the argument goes something like this: if only Stuart or Zagnut exploit Bob - and that was certainly never my nor Susan's intention - then we're both off the hook. No harm, no foul.

The problem is, it's really a fine line. And since we're dealing with wiping MY memory as a consequence, personally I want to stay as far away from that line as possible.

Lastly, there's the issue of what do with Vincent, once we get our hands on him. The guy has murdered hundreds - maybe thousands - in cold blood!

We can't have him arrested; we have no proof. Do we string him up and boil him in acid? *That was Susan's suggestion, by the way. I seriously suggest that you never get on her bad side.*

Do we capture him or keep him prisoner? Do we recommend he get counseling? What about Prozac?

What the heck are we supposed to do? No consensus among us, whatsoever.

Me, personally? I haven't a clue.

It felt like opportunity was quickly slipping away, and along with it, all hope.

But all that was about to change.

"Mail's here!" Mom called out from the kitchen window.

Susan look at me as I shrugged. "Probably another birthday card." I grumbled on my way out.

Susan and I would both be turning seventeen soon, just before the wedding. And birthdays for me are still rather anticlimactic.

I came back with the package, frowning.

"Who's it from?" Susan asked.

"No return address." I opened it up. And then I felt light-headed.

"Ben, what is it!?" Susan exclaimed, as she jumped up.

I sat down, handing her the package. Inside were four bus tickets, \$500 in cash, and a short note:

*Bring camp gear.*

*See you soon.*

*-E*

The tickets were date-stamped for Monday morning. We could only assume that Elias would be meeting us at the bus station on the other end.

It was brilliant! Our parents certainly would have no problem with us going away on a camping trip for spring break. Heck, we've gone on snow trips and camping trips lots of times!

So the four of us marched around to each of our houses to get our parents' permission. The only objection came from Susan's parents.

"Okay, you may go. But we expect you and Benjamin to behave, do you understand? Stuart and Zagnut, we expect you to keep a sharp eye on these two, at all times. Are we agreed?"

With big, stupid grins on their faces, Stuart and Zagnut gave them a huge thumbs up!

*What did I do to deserve this!?*

"Don't worry about Ben, Mom. He'll be a perfect gentleman!"

"Better not be." she whispered.

I could tell this was going to be nothing but trouble from the start.

## Chapter 44

As you might imagine, the next two days really did fly by. It was now Sunday afternoon, and while we all were packing our tents and gear, Susan brought up the questions that none of us had thought of.

"Okay, so ... how did Elias know we found Vincent? How did he find out he changed his name? How does he know Vincent/Anton is in San Jose? How does he know you've finally decided to go after him? How does he know you don't have your car? I thought only we knew all of that?"

Everyone looked straight at me. I thought about it. I tried to look really intelligent.

"Hmmm?"

"Uh ... I dunno."

Monday morning came around and we were packing up my mom's station wagon. She was going to drop us off at the bus station.

"I get the 'way-back'!" Zagnut shouted, as he jumped into the car. "Shotgun!" Stuart declared.

We got the middle.

No sooner had we buckled our seatbelts, when Mom started in. "I'm just so proud of all of you! Look at you! My, my. You're all so grown up, now! And how you've managed to save up for those bus tickets!!"

We just looked out the windows, guiltily.

"Why, I remember like it was yesterday. You were all just little tikes, swimming in that teeny, tiny inflatable pool in the back yard, wearing nothing but your underwear..."

"Aw, geez, Mom!" And everybody started complaining. It was like that the whole way to the bus station; forty five minutes away.

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The seven hour bus trip itself was uneventful.

And very depressing.

Our parents thought we were going camping in Mammoth Lakes, California. Little did they know they might possibly be sending their children away for the last time.

During the entire trip, we just stared out the bus windows, watching the scenery pass us by. Thinking. Contemplating. Wondering if we would ever see our families again.

Of course, Susan and I never once brought up the wedding, as we were trying very hard not to think about it.

After awhile, Susan fell asleep on my shoulder. She started having fits in her sleep. I could tell it was another nightmare, and so I woke her. She had finally told me about them, right after we had found Vincent. But she still wouldn't tell me what they were about.

She placed her head on my chest, gripped my shirt and held on tightly. She refused to say anything, except that she needed to hear my heartbeat. I could tell she was crying.

It doesn't matter if you are 17 or 63 ... how does someone like me, take on a monster like Vincent? I'm no warrior. I'm not a soldier. I didn't even letter in sports! Okay, so I was pretty good at ping-pong. But this? This was so far out of my league, it's not even funny. And the Fantastic Four was nothing but a bunch of goofy, gangly, high school misfits - children, really - who can't even save up for bus fare.

I couldn't believe how far this had gone. It was unreal. It was totally insane. The absolute gall of what we were doing.

We were fools, and I knew it.

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When the bus pulled up in the San Jose station, it was very late in the afternoon; soon it would be getting dark. We gathered our luggage and camping gear from the bus, and dragged ourselves into the station.

As expected, there was Elias. Standing there. Waiting. With a goofy grin on his face. And a ridiculous balloon in his hand that said 'SURPRISE!'

Remember how I said earlier that laughter was the best medicine? Well, I'll tell ya. There's nothing in this entire world that could have healed our dark, melancholic mood - except for the scene that stood before us. We instantly dropped our things and ran over to him, laughing and hugging him. It was just what the doctor ordered. Elias was always full of surprises; and I think he



knew we needed this one.

He had one more surprise, though, as he turned us around to face two small Mexican-Indian children. "I would like to introduce all of you to my friends, Monica and Ramón."

"H ... hello...", we said hesitantly, having no idea what was going on.

They looked frightened.

"Monica? Ramón?" Elias motioned at them.

"Hello, Bean ... Sussan ... Stew Art ... Z-z-zag-nut."

Unable to speak English, Elias had obviously been coaching them in our names.

Susan was the first to walk over and greet them, personally. "I am pleased to meet you." she said, giving them her warmest smile.

Maybe it was because Susan was smaller than the rest of us, and about their size; but she charmed them immediately. Without knowing anything about them or why they were there, she sat down on a bench beside where they were standing. Perhaps she sensed their importance, I don't know, but for a time she forgot all about us and focused exclusively on them.

"You are very pretty." Susan said to Monica. The girl seemed to know exactly what Susan was saying and smiled.

Then she pointed to Susan.

"Why, thank you!"

Susan sized up Ramón, then turned back to Monica. And while smiling at Monica and nodding towards Ramón, she pointed at her bicep. Monica happily nodded, agreeing heartily, confirming Susan's suspicions.

Ramón was grinning proudly. Then Susan smiled at them both, pointing back and forth at each of them. They blushed.

"They're small, but they're not children." she announced, still facing them.

*How does she do that!?* I was in awe. "Who are they, Elias?" I asked.

"These two ... are how you shall defeat Vincent."

## Chapter 45

Elias had already arranged for a taxi shuttle to pick up the seven of us.

We drove for an hour past the outskirts of the city, heading towards ... whatever destination he had chosen. During which time, we couldn't stop telling Elias about everything that had happened over the last several months since we last saw him. The previous seven hours of moody silence had been broken by an unending flood of information, laughter and incessant jabber.

At one point I looked up at Elias in alarm and pointed at the shuttle driver. Elias smiled, then leaned over and asked the driver how far we were from San Jose.

"No speak English." The driver replied.

I laughed and we started up all over again.

"Elias!" said Zagnut. "We went to jail!!"

"Oh?"

"Oh, don't get me started again!" said Susan angrily.

Elias looked at me. "I trust the consequences have proven ... effective?"

I cleared my throat and looked away from Susan.

Zagnut started snickering. "Yup. I would say so."

Then Stuart started snickering. Finally even Susan joined in. Once more, we all began laughing and talking at once, and Elias certainly got an earful.

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We arrived at the campground at dusk, and Susan immediately began giving orders, as was customary.

We had three large tents to share between the seven of us. The girls would get one, the boys would get one, and Elias would have one to himself; along with the food and the supplies.

Thus the boys were to erect the tents and collect the firewood, while the girls swept out the tents and established a cooking area.

In the past, the four of us had always taken turns with all the responsibilities, including the cooking and cleaning. But ever the smart one, Susan thought this arrangement might be more customary for Monica and Ramón, making them feel more comfortable.

There was no surprise meal, appearing out of thin air. Elias let us do everything the old-fashioned way. Which was great, because Elias had brought all this wonderful food with him! Most of the ingredients were native to Baja and Mexico. This allowed Monica to demonstrate her cooking talents, which were remarkable.

Susan was thrilled to have Monica teach her new cooking skills and recipes. The two girls hit it off instantly. For two people who couldn't speak each other's language, it was astonishing to see how easily they communicated.

Occasionally they would both look over at us and start giggling. I hadn't a clue as to which of us was the butt of their jokes, but it was fun to watch, just the same.

I knew that Elias would fill us in when he was ready, and that it probably wasn't going to be tonight. I think we were all very content with not having to think about what was coming, for a change.

Ramón was very gracious and polite. But he seemed subdued and introspective. As I watched him tend the fire, I could tell it had nothing to do with his personality or us.

Something had happened to him.

Elias thoroughly enjoyed himself, watching all of our antics. It was a wonderful and rejuvenating evening for us all.

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Susan suggested that we all hit the sack, early. She was probably right; it had been an emotional and exhausting day.

She and Monica then got up and headed towards their tent.

I was stunned. *Not even a good night kiss!?* I just stood there, utterly dejected.

When they got to their tent, they stopped. It looked like Monica was asking Susan something. Susan looked over towards Ramón, then back at Monica. Susan nodded, then held up a finger as if scolding her. Monica

laughed, and then ran over to Ramón.

I watched as they walked off a short distance and sat on a large rock together.

As I looked back towards Susan, I was surprised to see she was looking directly at me. She motioned with her finger for me to come over. My hope was returning!

I got my kiss.

## Chapter 46

The next morning I got up early and smelled ... well, what do you think? Other than Elias, I was the first person up. When I stepped outside, Elias waved me over. I sat down across from him at the large fire pit to check out the menu.

Besides bacon, there were eggs, tortillas and rice.

Then he tapped me on the shoulder and pointed over to my left. On a picnic table was a small, single-burner Coleman stove - and on the stove was ... was ... was ... oh, yes, indeed! A full pot of piping, hot coffee!

"No way!" I shouted.

Elias laughed, as I leaped up to grab a cup.

"What's everyone laughing at?" Susan asked sleepily, as she emerged from her tent.

"Check it out!" I grinned, holding up the coffee pot.

"No way!" she exclaimed, as she ran over to grab herself a cup. Elias was still laughing.

Starbucks had never made anything that tasted as good as that cheap tin cup of percolated camp coffee did that morning.

Soon, everyone else had gotten up and were sitting around the campfire. It seemed that Susan and I were the only two interested in the coffee; which was fine; more for us!

Monica took a good, long look at Elias' cooking - and then applauded him. We all laughed.

After breakfast I walked over to Susan to give her a hug. But the moment I put my arms around her, she shoved me away.

"P-U! When did you shower last!?"

"What!? I don't know ... maybe it's from chopping up all that firewood, last night."

"Well, go shower! And don't come back until you've chopped up some

soap!"

Ramón was pointing at me and actually laughing.

"You, too, Ramón!" Susan ordered.

He stopped laughing.

"And while you're at it, you might as well take Zag and Stu with you."

"Hey!" they complained in unison.

The four of us marched off in misery to the camp showers. The girls went in the other direction towards another group of showers. Fortunately, the shower stalls had doors. I hate open shower bays.

Ramón just stood there looking at the showers.

Then it hit me. Painfully.

I smiled at him and waved him over. I showed him how to work the hot and cold controls. He was amazed and nodded his thanks.

Frankly, that was a little tough for me. I found myself needing to talk to Elias about why this kid had never before seen a shower with running water.

I removed my socks and shoes, stripped to the waist, then picked up my towel and clothes to head into my shower stall.

So did Ramón.

If I thought the shower thing was tough, nothing had ever prepared me for what I saw next. For across the middle of Ramón's back was the largest, most horrendous red scar I had ever seen in my life. It must have been a foot long!

Then he turned around, and to my horror, I saw the scar's twin. Right across the middle of his chest was the same ghastly, ropey wound.

Ramón has been run clear through. And I swear, it looked like it had passed right through his heart!

It was so horrific, it began to nauseate me.

Zagnut had just rolled up his towel and was about to snap Stuart, when he got a look. "Holy ... Moses..."

Stuart turned and also saw, and his mouth hit the floor.

Ramón had no idea he would have been the cause of such commotion. He was embarrassed and pulled his towel to himself. I immediately regained my senses and told Ramón that it was okay. I had to say it four or five times. Eventually, he began to relax and nodded.

I looked him directly in the eye, and nodded towards the hideous wound. He looked at me, then looked at his chest, then slowly pulled the towel away so that I could get a better look.

"Vincent." he said.

Somehow I had expected that. And I nodded.

"Machete."

"Machete?" I repeated, demonstrating a thrusting motion with my arm.

He nodded.

Then he said, "Señor Elias."

And I understood.

## Chapter 47

After we bathed, we returned to camp. The two girls were also just returning.

Immediately Monica gave Ramón an approving look-over. "Bueno!" she said, and they started chattering away happily. I think he was telling her about showers! They decided to go for a short walk.

The rest of us sat down near the fire pit, near Susan and Elias. I just looked at Elias - and he nodded at me.

Susan knew something was up. "Ben, what happened?"

As I told her, her hand shot to her mouth in horror, and she stood up, looking for them.

Immediately there were tears in her eyes. I put my hand on her arm, encouraging her to sit down, again. She obviously wanted to do something to help, but she had no idea what to do.

"He is okay, now." Elias explained. "The bad dreams are still there, but they come less frequently."

And any reservations or doubts that I may have had, about doing whatever I had to do to stop Vincent, were now far removed from me.

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Elias then began to tell us everything about Ramón, Monica, his family, and the Oaxacan Indians. He told us about the labor camps and how the Mexican nationals would import them over from Oaxaca, Mexico, and enslave the smaller Indian people. He told us about the atrocious living conditions inside the labor camps, living in tiny huts of cardboard and tin.

"I guess that explains why Ramón has never seen a shower, before." I said, shaking my head.

Then he told us how he had found Ramón in the wilderness, very close to death. And how he had spent several weeks watching over him, until he was well enough to travel back to San Vicente for proper medical attention.

"If I had had access to a medical facility sooner, the scars would have healed better. Unfortunately, he was fighting death for so long, I was unable to



move him."

Then he told us how he had purchased Ramón and his family from the slave camp. And Monica's family, as well. He had obtained work for Monica's father in town at San Vicente. But he felt that Ramón needed to be far away from that place, so he bought 20 acres of farmland about 75 miles south and relocated them.

"Elias, what you did ... for all of them ... that was amazing!" Susan exclaimed.

"Where did you get the money to do all that?" Zagnut asked.

"It does not cost as much as one might think. Especially in that region of the country. Just the money in the package I had sent you is enough to purchase one slave; an entire family is not that much more."

"Thanks for that, by the way." I said. I was starting to feel guilty about the \$500 in my wallet. For a lot of reasons.

"It's sad to think of all those slaves still living there." said Stuart. "I didn't know that slaves even existed in the world, anymore."

"What's going to happen to them?" Susan asked. "I mean ... you know ... after..."

"They are already beginning to long for home. They have been traveling with me for some time, now. They have good lives to return to." Elias looked at them in the distance. "You have noticed their affection for each other. I expect Ramón and Monica shall have their own farm, not far from his family, by this time next year."

Lost in our thoughts, none of us spoke again for some time.

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After awhile, another thought occurred to me. "Elias, what were you doing out there in the first place? Out in the middle of nowhere?"

By now, Monica and Ramón had joined us at the campfire. They were all excited about something they had just found. Especially Ramón.

Susan practically leaped up to stand next to them; and to see what it was. It was an old model airplane. They handed it to her, and she began inspecting it. "Oh, it's broken." she said sadly.

Stuart jumped up and said, "Here, let me look at it. Okay, the propeller is fine. So's the tail. The wings can be mended, I think. All we need is some rubber bands, and maybe..."

Stuart ran to his tent and came back a minute later. He worked on the little airplane while Ramón and Monica looked on over his shoulder.

"I was on a mission of my own, if you will." Elias finally answered. "I was looking for ... someone."

"You were looking for Vincent, weren't you?" I asked, while watching Stuart work on the airplane.

"No, not Vincent. Someone else." Elias didn't seem to want to say anything, after that.

"Waiting!" Susan said.

"I am sorry; I was considering my words." Elias sighed for a moment. "You see ... Vincent is not the only danger."

Susan and I looked at each other.

"There is another." Elias continued.

"What ... he has a brother, now!?" Zagnut halfway joked.

"No, no brothers." Elias paused again for a moment. "For many years, I have been hunting a ... creature."

"Okay ... what sort of ... creature." I asked.

"I know! A Chupacabra!" Zagnut announced proudly. "I know all about them!! You know, they're these vampire things that come out at night and suck the blood of goats and..."

"Shut up, you dork!" Susan yelled at him.

Ramón and Monica started laughing when Zag mentioned "Chupacabra".

"They know more than you and they've never even been to school!" she scolded.

Zagnut grinned sheepishly. "Sorry ... shutting up now."

Elias wasn't laughing. Rather, he patiently waited for us to settle down. Finally ... "The creature's name ... is Fallow."

At the name, Ramón gasped and hurled a look at Elias. Elias spoke to Ramón for a few moments in fluent Spanish, and Ramón began to calm down.

"I take it that Ramón knows about this Fallow ... creature ... whatever it is." I said.

"Actually, I do not know if even 'creature' is quite the right word."

We waited for the bombshell.

"Fallow, I am afraid, is a demon."

## Chapter 48

"A demon." I said, matter-of-factly. "Okay, that's new." I was just humoring Elias; because I didn't believe a word of it. I gathered by the looks of the others that they didn't believe him, either.

"You mean ... demon. Like ... Linda Blair, spinning-her-head-around, spitting-up-green-pea-soup ... demon."

"Who's Linda Blair?" Zagnut asked.

"Zag, remember how I told you never to go see that movie 'The Exorcist'? [4] I mean it - it'll seriously creep you out." I warned.

"No, nothing like that." Elias said smiling.

"What about a Balrog!?" [5] Stuart offered. "You know, like from Lord of the Rings!?"

"Eh ... maybe you are getting a little warmer." Elias said.

"You're serious, aren't you?" Susan asked.

"Wait a minute." I interrupted. "Are you telling me ... that in addition to Vincent, now I also have to fight a demon!?"

"No, no, Ben Davison; this one is not your battle; that task falls to another."

*Whew!*

"Who, Elias? You?" Susan asked.

"I apologize, but I cannot speak of that further."

Stuart had completed his repairs on the little airplane, and with the windup propeller in full operation, Ramón and Monica ran off to try it out.

"So what about Ramón?" I asked. "What's his connection to Fallow?"

"Ramón was with Vincent, when they both encountered Fallow."

"Whoa!" exclaimed Zagnut.

"From what I understand from Ramón..." Elias continued, "...it was

Vincent who first stumbled upon Fallow. Vincent fell under his influence and was ordered to bring Ramón back with him."

"What did Fallow want with Ramón?"

"Ramón tells me Fallow's influence was extraordinarily strong. He offered them many things. Mostly power. Even Ramón was tempted, and he nearly succumbed. Apparently it was Monica - his thoughts and love for her - that gave his will the boost he needed to overcome Fallow's powerful temptations."

"Awww, that's just so..." Susan sighed, dreamily.

"Susan, come on! This is serious!" I said.

"Oh, sorry."

"Please continue, Elias." I said.

"Ramón then managed to escape from Fallow. But not before Fallow had instructed Vincent to kill Ramón, in exchange for true power."

"That's terrible!" Susan exclaimed.

"By 'power', you mean like magic powers?" I asked. "Or ... super powers?"

"Your minds, my friends, are capable of far more than you realize. Humans have a long way to go before they realize their full potential. But Fallow knows that if a person can fully and completely sear his conscience, he becomes capable of doing things no other human could even consider. For he now has the capacity to commit unspeakable acts, as his mind becomes twisted and corrupt. And for some - not all, this corruption can even unlock a part of the brain which results in physical manifestations of their evil will and desires."

"Elias?" Susan asked fearfully. She already knew the answer; for she had dreamed about it.

"Vincent now has such power. He no longer requires a weapon to kill."

No one spoke for a long time.

Finally, Stuart asked "So, about Fallow..."

"Vincent killed him."

I was shocked. "Vincent? Killed a demon!?"

"He believes he did. You see ... the thing about demons ... they cannot die."

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Now ... I've done my share of ghost stories, in my time. You know, you've been there - you've done it, too. Sitting around a campfire with coat hangers and roasting marshmallows, making smores, even. And believe me, I have come up with some real winners.

Between the four of us, you would think that Susan was always the target. After all, it's much easier and a lot more fun to scare a girl, right? Well, with us, Susan always had a more level head than the rest of us. About the only way you could get to her was with a creepy, crawly bug or frog or something. Other than that, you really couldn't get under her skin.

But you know who I could always get to? Zagnut. I could freak him out without even trying! And getting him to scream like a girl was one of our favorite pastimes.

But this time, I think all four of us were shaking in our boots. I found myself hoping deep inside that any minute Elias would jump up and yell, "Gotcha!!!"

But he never did.

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"So, he didn't kill Fallow?" Zagnut asked fearfully.

"No, he did kill him."

"You just said that Fallow can't die." I said.

"He cannot."

"Elias!"

"You can kill a demon; a thousand times a thousand times. But they will always come back. They cannot die."

"Swell. So that means that Fallow is still around."

"Yes."

"Around here!?" Zagnut asked alarmingly, looking around.

"He's keeping his eye on Vincent." Susan stated.

"Yes."

"Why?" I asked.

"Because Vincent is still vulnerable. Even now, he is still haunted by his own demons. He is haunted by dreams and visions of those to whom he has brought harm."

"Like Ramón." I said.

"Especially Ramón. From what Ramón tells me, as odd as it sounds, the slave and the master had begun to develop an odd sort of rapport; something almost akin to a friendship. Vincent actually liked Ramón."

"That makes what he did to Ramón even more despicable!" Susan exclaimed, angrily.

"And..." Elias continued, "...he was well aware of Ramón's affections towards Monica."

Susan was now absolutely livid.

"So now he's being haunted by what he did to Ramón." said Zagnut.

"And to Fallow, and his parents, and others he has killed; yes."

"So Fallow wants to help protect him from these nightmares." Stuart said.

"On the contrary. Fallow waits for the nightmares to push him over the edge."

"Why?" Susan asked, nervously. "What happens, then?"

"At this moment, Vincent still has the slightest measure of a conscience left. But very soon, the last and final shred shall pass away."

Then Elias looked at me. "Should Vincent kill once more without knowing remorse, nothing may prevent what he shall become. The hauntings shall cease. Vincent's conscience shall be irreversibly seared. And his corruption shall be complete."

"And that's when he becomes the most dangerous." Susan finished.

"Wow." said Stuart, shaking his head. "That sounds ... unpleasant."

We remained in silence for a time, thinking to ourselves.

"Okay, so ... what about Ramón ... and Monica..." I asked. "Why are they here?"

Elias looked up at the two small Indians playing with their airplane. We all turned to follow his gaze.

"Because they, too, are 'demons'."



## ~ Showdown ~

## Chapter 49

It had now been nine days since Vincent had last slept. There had been a few, brief moments where he nodded off for a second or two. But even in that brief span of time, his monsters came after him - immediately terrifying him back into consciousness.

"What have you done to me!!!?" he shrieked. "YOU!" he shouted, rebuking the imaginary ghost of Fallow hovering in front of him. "You promised me power! You said I would be invincible!! Look at me, now!!! I'm a ruin!!! Get away from me!! Get away from me!!!"

Vincent ran outside holding his head, screaming, as he slowly continued his descent into madness.

"Good, good. Yes, yes." the apparition cackled.

## Chapter 50

We stared at Ramón and Monica, horrified at what we had just heard.

"D ... d ... d ... demons!!?" Zag was crawling backwards, totally freaking out.

"Well ... not in the literal sense." Elias said matter-of-factly.

Then it hit us what he just said. "What!? What!!? WHAT!!!" I exclaimed. "They're NOT demons!?"

"Sorry, did you think I meant Ramón and Monica were demons, literally?"

"DUH!!!"

"Oh ... well ... please forgive me. I meant metaphorically ... speaking..."

Elias noticed that we were all glaring at him.

"Elias, don't you ever do that again!!!" Susan scolded, angrily.

Finally it was someone else's turn to experience the oncoming wrath of that diminutive hurricane.

Hearing all the shouting, Ramón and Monica came running over, looking very alarmed.

Susan ran to them and began squishing them both together in a giant bear hug. "Oh, come here you two!"

I was fairly certain they would not survive.

Squeezing them even tighter, she turned around and glared at Elias. "You are SO going to get it!!!"

Elias casually leaned towards me. "Feisty little firecracker, isn't she?"

"You have no idea."

Stuart suggested, "Uh, Susan ... you might want to ease off ... they're turning blue."

"Yeah, they're starting to look like smurfs!" noted Zagnut.

We took the rest of the day off. Susan didn't want to hear anything more about Vincent or Fallow or demons or Chubacabras. She had clearly had her belly full.

If any of us tried to say anything - especially Elias - she just held up her finger. "Uh!" And we would quickly ... and wisely ... shut our mouths.

It was actually kinda fun to see that. Elias was so tall, and coupled with his severe and intense features, most people would consider him extremely intimidating. Yet, Susan was quite literally half his size. It kinda reminded me of that Chihuahua and the German Shepherd.

Nevertheless, concerned about the timing of things, I looked to Elias nervously.

"Well, I think that is enough discussion for one day." he said, very statesmanlike.

"O ... kay."

It was only mid afternoon, but Susan had already decided that she and Monica would begin early preparations for dinner. I think Susan just wanted to think about cooking and normal routine stuff.

As for the rest of us - we went fishing.

We had all packed our own fishing gear, and Elias and Ramón had managed to bring along tackle and pole, as well.

For you see, fishing is universal. It knows no barriers, be it age, race, religion, politics, culture or even language. And so, the five of us mighty hunter-gatherers departed upon our quest, proud and mighty men of renown, in the pursuit of the elusive crappie.

For awhile, it was the perfect pastime. As we staked out our positions on the nearby river, we each had our own secret formula of just the right bait, hooks and lures - as we prepared our assault upon what lie beneath the murky depths.

To catch crappie consistently, the angler must understand how crappie see, where they prefer to live, what they prefer to eat, and how the weather and time of day influence their behavior.

We, of course, know nothing about that.

And so it was, that after more than three hours of failure to demonstrate our manly prowess, we decided it was time to tuck our tails between our legs and pack up.

None of us had caught a single thing.

Except Elias.

He had separated from us and had gone thirty yards upstream to where there were small rapids. Fish generally prefer quieter, deeper waters such as lakes or ponds.

We warned him. He insisted. We snickered when he left.

He returned, whistling. He calmly nodded greetings towards us, and began heading towards camp.

"Wait ... just ... one ... minute!" I ordered.

"Pardon me?"

"I want to see what's in that basket." I said, suspiciously.

"What basket? This basket?"

"Yes, THAT basket."

"Oh, well, I am sure it is no different than what is in your baskets."

"We don't HAVE anything in our baskets!"

"Really? Nothing at all? My, my, my, how curious. Why, I was only but a short distance away."

"Elias!" I pleaded.

"Well, okay, if you insist."

And with the most innocent of expressions, Elias proceeded to open his basket.

It was filled to the brim with the stupid crappie.

"Elias!" Stuart exclaimed.

"You cheated!" accused Zagnut.

I was disgusted.

Even Ramón was shaking his head at him. "Engañado." he said accusingly, pointing his finger at the basket.

Though we had no idea what Ramón had just said, we couldn't have agreed with him more and we nodded our heads.

"What?" Elias exclaimed, innocently.

Then he closed his basket, turned around, and continued whistling back towards camp.

\*\*\* \*\*

That evening as we were sitting around the campfire, the girls couldn't stop praising Elias for the delicious fish. Who, quite embarrassingly, I might add, was milking it for all its worth.

The rest of us sat around sulking.

But it didn't take long before our full stomachs won out over our egos, and we all finally lightened up, considerably.

*The fish really was excellent, I must admit.*

We stayed up late that night, well past midnight. Laughing, joking, playing tricks on each other, maybe a creepy, crawly bug or two; we had a grand and splendid evening.

I think we all knew and appreciated how special this moment really was, for I think we all knew that this was the calm before the storm.

And we needed to enjoy it as much as we could.

\*\*\* \*\*

We finally said good night to each other. Elias retired to his tent, Stuart and Zagnut headed to theirs. Then Stuart and Zagnut started cackling, and turned around, cupping their hands to their eyes like binoculars. "We've got our eyes on you!" They continued laughing as they disappeared into their tent.

Susan and I smiled, shaking our heads at them. We watched Monica and Ramón head off on one of their frequent walks.

She turned around towards me. Yawning, she said, "I love you Mr.

Davison."

"How romantic." I laughed.

"I'm sorry, Ben; I'm just so tired. These last few days..."

"I know. It's okay. I love you, too, Mrs. Davison."

She gave me a very nice ... and very long kiss. Then ... she turned and walked to her tent.

Just like that.

Believe me when I say ... I was nowhere near ready for her to leave. Not by a long shot. But when I saw how she was practically dragging her feet, I realized that she wasn't kidding about how tired she was.

I sighed as she disappeared into her tent.

I debated about whether I needed to go take a cold shower or not. After several minutes, I decided that I would survive and went to bed.

\*\*\* \*\*

It was maybe an hour or so later. I was in a very deep sleep, when suddenly I felt something nudging me. I didn't know what it was, at first. Then I realized it must be a bear and instantly woke up!

It was Susan. And she was squeezing into my sleeping bag! I quickly looked over at Stuart, Zagnut, and Ramón - fortunately they were all fast asleep.

I was having serious trouble trying to decide whether this was a great idea ... or a really, really bad one.

It was then that I realized she was crying. *She's had another nightmare.*

"Hey..." I whispered.

Susan just shook her head. Once again, she gripped my shirt, and placed her head on my chest to listen to my heartbeat. She refused to move from that position for the rest of the night.

\*\*\* \*\*

When I woke up the next morning, Susan was still there, in the same position, but fast asleep. I looked over and saw that Stuart, Zagnut and Ramón

were gone.

I tried to get up without waking her, but she immediately awoke when I started to move. She looked around, trying to get her bearings. Then she realized where she was.

"Oops." was all she said.

Besides being disheveled, Susan really wasn't looking well, at all; she was extremely pale.

I helped her to her feet. Looking at the clock, I saw that we had overslept. She stepped out of the tent, and I followed.

Everyone else was already at the campfire, and it looked like they had already eaten breakfast. As we approached them, we prepared ourselves for the onslaught of comments that we knew were coming.

Surprisingly, everyone remained quiet. Pleasant, even.

Elias smiled at us. Stuart and Zagnut brought us each a cup of coffee. Monica and Ramón graciously brought us breakfast. We had no idea what was going on ... or why. We were both very suspicious that they were all up to something and we were about to find out.

"Uh, what's going on, guys?" I asked.

"Nothing's going on." Stuart said.

I couldn't tell if he was serious or not. I decided that I could play their game and wait, so I didn't say anything.

Finally Zagnut spoke up. "We're not here to give you a hard time, if that's what you're thinking."

*Not was I was expecting.*

"Look, we ALL know about what's coming." Zagnut said. "We understand what you're going through. And, Susan, we know about the nightmares."

She looked up in surprise.

"How can we not know?" Zagnut continued. "We've known you our whole lives! We know everything about you!! You're like our sister! And ... well ... we love you."



Susan started sniffing. And if I wasn't mistaken, so was Stuart.

"So ... just let us be nice to you for once, okay? And stop giving me a hard time!"

Susan went over and hugged Stuart. Then she went over and hugged Zagnut. "You're such a dork." she said affectionately.

\*\*\* \*\*

After breakfast, Monica came up to Elias as he was sitting alone.

"Señor Elias?"

"Hello, my dear."

"May I ask you something?"

"Certainly, you may."

"What is wrong with Susan?"

Elias looked away and didn't answer.

"Please tell me, Señor Elias. She is my friend."

He sighed deeply, and looked over at Ben. "She has seen what must come to pass."

# Chapter 51

"Elias?"

"Yes, Ben Davison."

"Do you have a second?"

"As you wish."

While Susan and Monica had gone to the showers, I had managed to pull Elias aside.

Though we never did ask him to explain what he really meant by the 'Monica and Ramón are demons' thing, I certainly knew that they were just kids and not actual demons. But as for the rest, I had finally figured it out. And I had figured out what his plan was. In fact, I had figured it all out.

"I know." I said, simply. "I understand, now."

Elias didn't respond.

"I just thought you should know."

Elias simply nodded, continuing to stare at the ground.

"And Elias, thank you. For everything. I really mean it."

Then Elias surprised me as he looked me in the eye and gently touched my shoulder.

I couldn't tell what he had been thinking as he walked away.

\*\*\* \*\*

For the better part of the day, Susan never left my side. She stuck to me like a leech and always had to be touching me. Not that I minded, of course; but I could tell that something was up.

We didn't see Elias for the better part of the day. It wasn't until late afternoon when we spotted him standing alone, far off in the distance.

He was facing away from us, so we weren't able to see his face as we approached him.

"Hello, Elias." I said from behind.

Susan didn't say anything, but held onto my arm, tightly.

"You and your friends have proven to be quite remarkable." Elias said. "I am not sure I have seen the like."

"I guess we can be quite a handful, sometimes." I joked.

"Yes." was all he said.

I wasn't sure how to take that. We stood alongside Elias, looking in the direction that he was looking. He was watching the clouds moving around a distant mountain peak.

"It's a beautiful view." I said.

"That it is."

Apparently he wasn't feeling very chatty. But then again, I knew why. We stood there for several minutes, watching the view.

"It's time, isn't it?" I said, finally.

He simply nodded; and Susan squeezed, harder.

"I remember what you told me." I said.

Elias said nothing.

"You said, *'There are some things I cannot answer you, for you must learn those things on your own. The decisions you make in your new life must be of your own choosing.'*"

"Yes."

"I think the decisions I made weren't too bad this time, do you?"

"Indeed. You have surprised me, Ben Davison. I am quite proud of you."

Elias now seemed very distant to me.

"And I think I've learned a lot."

"And what do you think you have learned, Ben Davison?"

"Many things. More than I had ever thought possible. " I replied, as I

pulled Susan in closer to me. "One thing I've learned, is that I'm glad to call you my friend, Elias."

We remained silent for a time, watching the clouds in the distance.

"I wonder." he said, quietly.

I got the impression that he wanted to be alone. "We'll uh ... we're just gonna head back to the camp, now."

\*\*\* \*\*

When we got back, I noticed everyone seemed a little somber there, as well. Stuart, Zagnut, Monica and Ramón were all sitting around the campfire, just looking up at me as if for direction. Actually, I guess that's exactly what they were doing.

"Well, uh, I'm not sure what happens next, but I guess it's time to, uh ... start packing up camp."

That was my big speech.

Stuart and Zagnut looked at me for a moment.

Then ...

"Yup. Okay. Sure. Let's go."

And we set about breaking up camp. Afterwards, we hit the showers. When we returned, the taxi shuttle was waiting for us.

## Chapter 52

"So where are we going?" Stuart finally asked, breaking the silence.

None of us had spoken for the last half hour since we boarded the shuttle. It was dark out, and all we really knew was, we were possibly heading in the general direction of the San Jose area.

And to our doom.

Monica and Ramón had fallen asleep.

"We are going to an integrated circuit fabrication plant." Elias replied, matter-of-factly.

I'm sorry, but my curiosity got the better of me and I switched into nerd mode. "Really!? We're going to one of IBM's fab houses!?"

Everyone else was looking at me blankly.

"Fab? Fabrication!? Semiconductors? Silicon? Anybody!?" I tried.

"Actually, our person of interest is no longer working for IBM." said Elias. "He is now a plant manager for a small and fairly new company which calls itself ... Intel."

"Wow!" I exclaimed. "That's..." I was going to say 'cool', but the sudden sharp elbow in my ribs reminded me that we weren't on a field trip. "Wow ... that's ... that's ... uh ... that's good 'intel', Elias. Get it? Intel ... 'intel'...?"

I thought it was funny. Nobody else did.

"Stu, you know that 4004 chip we used in Bob? Right here, this is where they designed the big daddy! The one and only Intel 8008! We're actually going to see history in the making! Literally!"

By now, everybody was seriously 'geeking' at me.

Except Stuart, of course.

We spent the next half hour discussing CPU's, dynamic access ram memory, bits and bytes, and all kinds of nerdy goodness.

After trying to be patient, Susan finally put her foot down. Literally.

"Ouch!"

"Would you two knock it off already!?" she scolded.

I sighed.

"Elias, what's our plan when we get there?" she asked, sensibly.

"I am afraid I do not have a plan."

"No plan!?" I asked in surprise.

"This has always been about your decisions, Ben Davison, not mine. You know this to be true. As I have spoken before, in every step of the way, it has been your decisions which have been directing your destiny. All I have been doing is providing assistance, wherever I could."

Great. Nothing like having the entire world dumped on your shoulders. Actually I already knew that; it's just been awhile since I thought of it that way.

Naturally, that shut everybody up again.

"So ... is HE going to be there? At this fabrication plant, I mean?"

"He never leaves."

*I swear, one of these days I'm going to find out how he knows all this stuff!*  
"So ... what ... do I just walk up to 'Anton' with a broom handle and say, 'Your name is Vincent Atonescu. You killed your father. Prepare to die!'" *(I was quoting a line from my favorite movie, "The Princess Bride").* [6]

No one seemed to have a response.

\*\*\* \*\*

Late that evening, we stopped about a block away from the plant parking lot, still arguing. But we instantaneously hushed when we realized we had arrived.

Looking out at the ominous and foreboding structure before us, we had difficulty making out the details due to the fog. "June gloom" we call it in California - even though it was only May.

The plant itself was well lit, with plenty of lights turned on, on the inside of the building. The parking lot, however, was mostly dark. The entire facility

was surrounded by high fencing and security guards.

And while I couldn't prove it, I was fairly certain there were probably guard towers - complete with armed snipers and rocket launchers. And maybe even a moat.

Speaking of moats, my little leech was clinging on to me, tighter than ever.

"So how do we get in there?" Zagnut asked.

Personally, I felt we needed camouflage paint and infrared binoculars.

Elias suggested a more simple approach. "I believe you shall find a loading dock on the east side, with an open gate for trucks to make their deliveries. The fog should help cover you."

*Darn ... really wanted to try out those binoculars.* "Deliveries in the middle of the night?" I asked.

"Oh, yes. This place never sleeps."

*"Quite literally."* he muttered under his breath.

We started heading towards the east loading docks, when I noticed that Elias, Monica and Ramón were remaining behind. "Wait, aren't you coming!?"

"This task is for you, Ben Davison. I shall assist where I can. For now, I need to share a word with these two."

"Elias?"

We stood looking at each other. Never before had I seen such sorrow in a man's eyes. After several long moments, we finally smiled at each other; words were somehow inappropriate.

We turned and made our way to the loading docks.

## Chapter 53

Eleven days without sleep had rendered Vincent into a near vegetative state. He had entered into a relentless cycle where his brain would automatically shut down - at which time his ghosts and monsters would immediately frighten him back awake. He would sit in his chair, attempting to stay awake for as long as he could, sometimes for two or three hours at a time. Then his brain would shut down and begin the cycle all over again.

He had closed himself in his office, with instructions to not be disturbed for any reason, as he was "working on a new project".

His spacious office had its own bathroom and a mini kitchen; and his employees were more than willing to comply with their creepy and disturbing boss.

His ghosts remained the same, continually walking around and taunting him. Except that Fallow's ghost was now haunting him even when he was awake!

Not content to just lie there dead, anymore, Fallow's 'spirit' had now begun to circle him, speaking to him ... repeating over and over, things about power ... limitless ... unbounded ... immeasurable ... infinite ... inexhaustible. And then he would disappear again, letting the other ghosts take over for awhile.

But tonight something new had happened. While fully awake - or at least he thought so; he didn't really know anymore - Monica now appeared in the far opposite corner.

Curiously, Ramón's spirit had never visited Vincent. But he always knew that the day would likely eventually come. Vincent had tried to prepare himself for the confrontation with his very first victim. But now with Monica's appearance, he realized that he wasn't prepared at all.

Ramón ... the young boy who had been perhaps the only friend he had ever known. Having never known the love of a parent or even a guardian, Vincent had begun to feel, to some small degree, affection for the young lad.

And how did Vincent reward his friendship? By coldly and callously driving a machete through his heart, leaving his body to rot in a lonely, far away desert.

And now Monica had finally stopped searching for her lost Ramón. For



instead, she had now come here, to face and accuse Vincent.

As he sat in his prison cell chair of the last several days, he waited for Monica's rain of accusations to begin.

But they never came. For minutes, she simply stood there. Looking at him. Staring.

"What!?" he shouted at her. "Go ahead! Say it!! SAY IT!!!"

Suddenly, his fear began to be overcome with anger, and he stood to his feet. He was going to put an end to this, once and for all!

But then to his horror, out of the shadows stepped Ramón himself!!

And as Ramón stood next to Monica, they held hands ... and stared at him.

In sheer terror, Vincent fell back into his chair.

And wept.

## Chapter 54

"Come on, you guys! They're going to see us!" Zagnut argued.

"No they're not, there is too much fog," argued Stuart.

"It's too muddy!" argued Susan.

As we were preparing to face our deadly foe, and likely die horribly in the process, we couldn't stop arguing about the best way to "sneak".

Ever think about 'sneaking'? It's a great word. You picture yourself with hands curled over like claws, knees bent, walking around on your tiptoes. SNEAK. It's just so ... sneaky!

So here we are, master architects of this urban invasion assault of our enemy's headquarters, and we're arguing about how to sneak. Even Susan had broken out of her moody silence and had gotten in on the debate.

The world is doomed.

"Enough!" I said. "Elias even SAID that I'm the leader! So we're going to do it my way! Got it!?"

"Ooooh, look at mister bossy pants!" Zagnut started in.

"I said, 'that's enough!' It's either my way or the highway!"

"Fine! We'll do it your way!"

And we proceeded to 'sneak' across the shipping dock area, underneath parked semi trailer trucks, towards the large open doors marked RECEIVING.

Crawling on our bellies.

*Hey! That's how they always do it, right? Gimme a break.*

Surprisingly, we made it without detection. Susan was disgusted with all the grime. Me? I thought it was pretty cool. Next best thing to camouflage!

I don't know if people were on break or what, but there was nobody at the receiving desk, so we were able to slip inside, unnoticed.

We had no idea where we were going, so we had to just wander around for awhile. We made it out of the shipping area and began working our way

into the interior of the base.

I mean plant.

*I know you can hear the James Bond theme right now, can'tcha? Yeah, I'm right there with ya.*

We proceeded down several corridors - 'hallways' to you non-espionage types - and after several harrowing, near encounters with 'base' personnel, we finally came to the Cleanroom areas of the plant.

Cleanrooms are where they wear the masks and hooded garments, and all the smallest particles, microbes and contaminants are constantly being sucked out of the rooms. In the highest level of Cleanrooms, where the microscopic silicon wafers are etched and prepared for CPU use, there are actual airlocks through which staff must enter and exit.

It was so cool!!

Stuart and I were utterly and completely enraptured with the glory that lay before us. It was Shangri La! It must have taken three slaps to the side of my head before Susan finally snapped me out of it.

We made our way through the part of the plant where they design the CPU processor chips, themselves.

We're in a bit of a rush, so I can't take too long to explain, you understand. But basically, the engineers map and draw out the entire CPU - transistor circuitry and all - on large wall-size sheets of paper. Then they photograph the paper, and using the negatives, they shrink it down small enough to burn and etch the pathways onto small slivers or wafers of silicon. Presto, a CPU chip.

So, here we are walking around, seeing all of these top-secret CPU designs hanging on the walls of different rooms and labs.

It was beautiful. It was glorious. Stuart was close to tears.

The primary fabrication plant for Intel was a huge facility. But we finally succeeded in making our way to the western wing. We stopped dead in our tracks when we saw the writing on the wall. It was a sign:

## ADMINISTRATION

We were just about to enter the area when Susan finally and completely broke down. She had been trying to be brave for me all this time, but she just couldn't hold it in any longer.

We managed to slip into a nearby cleaning closet and shut the door. Stuart and Zagnut stood guard outside, as I held her and let her sob.

It had to have been nearly half an hour of waterworks; for both of us, really. We kept holding each other and telling each other how much we loved each other. That was really about all we could say.

When it was finally over, we just sat there in silence for several more minutes. Thinking about the past three years - and our lives before then and since then - and our friends - and our families.

And Bob the janitor. It really smelled awful in there.

Then someone banged on the door. Someone was coming!

## Chapter 55

We nervously waited several minutes, but didn't hear anything. Then I reached over and cracked open the door. I didn't see anyone and there was no sign of Stuart or Zagnut. I started to open the door wider . . . when someone grabbed the door and flung it wide open!

"Are you guys about done!!?" Zagnut whispered, loudly.

"Geez, Louise..." said Stuart. "The janitor just came down this way! We thought for SURE he was going to open that door!"

"Yeah!" said Zagnut. "And Stuart was going to knock him out! Cold!!!"

"I was, too!" Stuart said, proudly.

"Thanks, you guys." I said, grabbing Susan's hand.

"Wow, Susan. You look awful." noted Zagnut.

No offense to Susan, but she really did. Besides being pale, she also appeared gaunt. Her eyes were obviously bloodshot, but she also had sunken cheeks and looked extremely frail. She looked like death.

We had no trouble finding our way towards the executive wing.

And before we knew it, we had arrived at a large, double door with a sign on it:

### PLANT MANAGER

We stood there, nervously looking over our shoulders, not knowing what to do next.

There were no locks on the doors. Apparently, Vincent didn't feel that he needed any.

By now, a million thoughts were racing through my head, and my mind was struggling with trying to keep up with all of them. But one thought in particular kept standing out: *This is the moment! Showdown!*

I knew Vincent, but he didn't know me. At least not for at least thirty more years. So I knew that I was going to be a complete and total stranger to him.

I kept reviewing in my mind all of the different scenarios - everything

from barging into his office and demanding to know what he was doing - to walking in and casually introducing myself - to bursting in with a surprise attack; I imagined a hundred different encounters in my head.

Then in the midst of it all, I pictured Ramón - with that hideous scar on his body, and his look of embarrassment as he tried to hide it from us. And that's when I determined that nothing else mattered except taking care of the monster behind those doors.

Suddenly Susan grabbed my face and kissed me. "Ben, I love you! Forever and always! We'll be together, no matter what! I promise you!"

"I love you, too." I replied, as I kissed her back, fiercely.

Then I pulled away from her and grabbed the two door handles, knowing that I had the advantage of surprise on my side.

## Chapter 56

For the first time in his life, Vincent was experiencing regret. It was an overwhelming and overpowering emotion, and he had never known anything like it. Seeing the spirit of Ramón had shattered barriers that had erected themselves over the course of his entire life.

Vincent was sorry.

His mind was flooded with the deaths of innocents at his hands. His own father and mother!

*Murderer! Murderer!! MURDERER!!!*

Several minutes passed as he buried his face in his hands, unable to look upon the faces of the two children standing before him, accusing him of his many crimes.

Then a thought struck him. Perhaps ... he might be able to communicate with them. Perhaps he could somehow tell them how sorry he was for killing them!

But then another conflicting thought struck his mind.

Killing them? Killing THEM? He killed Ramón, sure, but he never killed Monica.

*I never killed Monica!!! So ... if Monica is not dead, then why is she here? What is her purpose?*

Vincent didn't understand. Slowly and cautiously, he raised his head to look at his tormenters, fearful to gaze upon their faces. He wasn't prepared for what he saw next ...

The two spirits of Ramón and Monica were ... talking ... to each other.

*Talking?*

Suddenly they realized that Vincent was looking at them, and they looked back at him, fearfully!

*What is this!? They are afraid!? Of me!? How can spirits be afraid of me!?*

Then Vincent knew the truth.

"You are alive!" he exclaimed. "You are alive!!"

Ramón and Monica were frightened. This wasn't part of the plan.

Vincent leaped to his feet. "How can you be alive!?" he demanded, furiously. "I killed you! I watched you die!!"

Ramón and Monica just stood there, shaking their heads, frozen in sheer terror.

"I ran you through! How can you be alive!? Tell me!! Tell me!!!"

It was all starting to make sense, now. Somehow, Ramón had managed to survive. And now he had brought his sweetheart with him to frighten him ... and make him pay.

Vincent was incensed with rage. That these children could make such a fool out of him! Vincent began walking towards them with his hand outstretched, pointing at Ramón.

Suddenly, the doors to his office burst open! And in walked four complete strangers.

And they did not look happy.

"Look out!" shouted the one in front, to Ramón and Monica. "Stuart!" he yelled, pointing at them.

Stuart leaped towards the kids, knocking them over.

Vincent spun around with his attention now focused on the intruders. Glaring at the one in front, he demanded, "Who are you!?"

The one in front answered angrily, "Who I am doesn't matter. What matters is this: I know who you are, Vincent Atonescu!"

An evil smile spread across Vincent's lips. "If you know who I am, then you know what I can do." Vincent raised his hand towards Ben. As Ben looked into Vincent's eyes, he knew this was it; this was the end. Vincent sneered at Ben and pointed towards him.

Nothing happened.

Vincent's sneer turned into consternation, as he realized that his power had



left him. He knew the reason why. His momentary weakness of regret had blocked him from his source.

*No matter, that can be remedied. And there are many ways to kill!*

Vincent reached over to a nearby shelf and grabbed his old machete, which he had kept as something of a trophy. Vincent began swinging it at Ben.

With each swing, Ben barely managed to leap out of the way, while at the same time frantically searching for some other sort of weapon with which to defend himself.

Everything was happening so fast! It was all a blur. Everybody was yelling and screaming and running...

Finally Ben found what he was looking for; for on Vincent's desk lay a long, sharp, knife-like letter opener. He dove towards the desk and rolled, knowing that Vincent was right behind him.

Quickly pulling himself up, Ben managed to reach across the desk and grasp the letter opener - then he spun around to face the monster.

Only he was too slow.

As he turned to face Vincent, Ben was stopped dead in his tracks by a large, sharp, evil-looking machete being held up to Ben's chest.

But Vincent just stood there. For some reason he couldn't go through with it.

Ben remembered Elias' words: *"Should Vincent kill once more without knowing remorse, nothing may prevent what he shall become."*

Ben had understood there was only one way to save the world, including all those he loved. He looked into Vincent's eyes and saw the conflict. Monica and Ramón had indeed done their part, seeding remorse into Vincent's soul.

Ben lowered his hands, dropped his weapon, and closed his eyes.

The battle between penitence and the lust for power raged within Vincent. "You cannot stop me!!!" he shrieked at Ben, frustrated with himself and his impotence.

Ben didn't respond. He simply stood there, waiting.

*To end the threat of Vincent...*

The many cold and desolate years had taken their toll on Vincent's mind. Finally the long battle came to an end.

*...Vincent must kill once more, after knowing remorse.*

With a malevolent grin, Vincent thrust the machete forward, ripping through Ben's heart.

\*\*\* \*\*

Time slowed down . . .

*Looking down, he saw the machete buried deep in his chest.*

*Looking up, he saw Vincent standing there, pure wicked evil in his eyes, greedily pulling out the blade.*

*But he also saw something else in Vincent's eyes. And Ben knew he had won.*

*Ben looked over and saw Monica and Ramón huddled in the corner with Stuart.*

*Zagnut was yelling and grabbed Vincent from behind, pulling him away.*

*Susan was rushing towards him, screaming.*

*The blood pounding in Ben's head had stopped.*

*His legs gave out and he began to fall.*

*Susan reached him as he hit the floor.*

*He could no longer hear anything, but he could see her crying his name.*

*Ben looked at Susan - and smiled at her.*

*He had done it. He had saved the world.*

\*\*\* \*\*

And then Ben Davison was dead.

## Chapter 57

When Stuart saw Susan weeping over Ben's body, he sprang into action, leaving Monica and Ramón, behind. Running over to where Zagnut was struggling with Vincent, he grabbed Vincent's sword arm to prevent him from striking Zagnut; and the two of them finally managed to wrest the machete away from his tightened grip.

Then Zagnut picked up the machete and threateningly held it in front of Vincent's face, while Stuart held back both of his arms.

Vincent looked at the machete in Zagnut's hand and began to laugh.

Zagnut then turned and looked over at Ben's body, and was completely consumed with rage. Turning back towards Vincent, he raised his hand to strike.

Vincent began laughing maniacally, causing Zagnut to hesitate; for before him was a man on the verge of going completely insane, right before his very eyes.

As Vincent continued laughing, Victor and Selena suddenly appeared. His mother was smiling at him. Then he looked at his father, who was smiling at him as well. They both held out their arms to him.

Vincent completely forgot about everyone else around him, and could now see only his parents.

And in his mind, Vincent finally and completely let go.

He stood up to greet them. Suddenly, his mother stopped smiling. She pointed at him and began laughing. His father began mocking him.

And Vincent started screaming.

Zagnut watched the startling transformation take place. Sitting there with his arms held back by Stuart, Vincent began appealing to whoever or whatever he was seeing.

Stuart abruptly let go and backed away.

"No! No!! NO!!!" Vincent pleaded.

Then, with utter despair and anguish on his face, his eyes fixed wide open.

Vincent Atonescu sat on his knees, frozen in time like a statue ... dead.

\*\*\* \*\*

Then Zagnut watched as Stuart suddenly looked up, as something behind him in the corner terrified him. He spun around and saw the most hideous-looking creature he could never have imagined.

Fallow had returned.

Stuart and Zagnut both jumped away out of his path in terror.

Fallow was livid with rage at the loss of his progeny, and had started moving towards Susan ... pure wickedness ... floating ... stalking ...

It was then that Elias entered the room, causing Fallow to suddenly pause and turn around.

"YOU!!!" Fallow screeched.

"You may not touch them." Elias said quietly, as he walked towards Susan. He didn't even bother looking in Fallow's direction.

Fallow began backing away, hissing like an angry snake.

Elias stopped and looked down at Susan; she was kneeling over Ben's body weeping, completely ignoring everything else that was happening around her. He placed his hand on her shoulder, and she looked up at him.

"Please, Elias! Please!! Do something!!!"

Elias looked at her with great sadness, but didn't move.

"He cannot!" Fallow cackled with glee.

Still looking down at Susan, Elias rebuked Fallow, "This is not your place!"

"Nor yours, prophet!!!" Fallow spat.

Elias warned, "Impede me no longer, demon!"

"You cannot! Their time is done!! YOU HAVEN'T THE RIGHT!!!"

Elias turned and faced Fallow, and with full fury he roared:

"DO ... NOT ... TEMPT ... ME!!!"

Fallow slowly began backing away, glaring at Elias with cold hatred and contempt.

Then Elias turned his attention to someone ... or something ... in the far, dark corner of the room. "Do not fight me on this. It shall be as I ask. Remove this creature from my sight! DO IT NOW!"

"NO!!!" Fallow screamed!

Suddenly Fallow began to dissolve ... slowly and completely into a tornadic mist.

And then the mist was gone.

An astonished Stuart and Zagnut had no clue as to the unseen entity that Elias had just spoken to.

Susan was now lying on the ground beside Ben, her head next to his. And in her hand, she now held tightly onto the sharp, letter opener, close to her chest. There was blood everywhere. On the floor ... all over Ben ... all over Susan...

The others watched as Elias then knelt beside Ben and Susan, as if paying homage.

"He's gone!" Susan cried. "You brought me back here! I don't want to be alone!"

Elias spoke to Susan in a quiet, barely audible voice. "Susan ... I ..."

Stuart and Zagnut looked at each other and quickly ran over. They stood next to Susan and their fallen friend. With Fallow now gone, Ramón and Monica also came running over to stand beside them.

Zagnut reached down to touch her, but she softly brushed his hand away. "No. Don't touch me. He is my husband. I'm not leaving him again."

Stuart and Zagnut looked at her helplessly, with tears streaming down their faces.

Then for one last time, she rested her head upon his chest.

Listening.

Waiting.

Patiently.

And then ... finally ... she heard it.

What she had been waiting all of these months to hear.

Ben's heartbeat.

## ~ Endings ~

## Chapter 58

FFFWWWOOPPP!!!!!!

A giant, wet yellow sponge landed on my face.

*What in the ...*

I sat up too quickly and began to get dizzy. I could hear Zag and Stu snickering just outside the door of my tent.

Then I heard screams of pain, as their devious plot had been discovered and they were chased away by a crazed wild woman with a large broom. I could hear their yelps of pain all the way to the far side of camp!

I slowly laid back in peace, smiling; for I knew I had been avenged. Moments later the wild woman stepped into my tent and sat down next to me. She briefly put her ear to my chest.

"Yup, still tickin."

I smiled and gave her a kiss. "If you promise to keep protecting me like that, I'll make it worth your while."

"Is that so? I think I just might take you up on that, Mr. Davison."

It's been a few days since we've been back at the campsite. I had only been in the hospital for two days.

Which you gotta admit is fairly impressive, considering I had died.

The doctors said I had been very fortunate. The 'tent stake' I had fallen on had almost punctured my heart.

*If they only knew.*

They stitched me up and said that I would be pretty sore for a couple of months, "...so get some rest and take it easy for the rest of the summer."

I mentioned our wedding date and the doctor laughed, saying that I should be more than fit for our wedding night. Even Susan got embarrassed that time.

Stuart and Zagnut managed to talk our parents into letting us extend our camping trip for a couple of more days, on through the weekend. I believe they said "we were having quite the adventure".



*Ya think?*

I told them not to mention 'the accident'. I didn't want to worry Mom; that could wait until after we got home.

Oh, and they promised Susan's parents that I was behaving.

I saw two shadows near the door of my tent.

"Come in." Susan said.

As Monica and Ramón entered, they smiled when they saw me sitting back up, and I waved them over.

"This is the first time they've come to visit you since we've come back from the hospital. They've been fearful to interfere with your recovery. But then they heard all the commotion...", said Susan, as she looked out the tent window, shaking her head.

Then Ramón said something to Susan.

"Ramón tells me that it took him much longer to recover."

"Ramón told you that? What, you speak Spanish now!?"

"Oh, I've been picking it up a little. It's been pretty quiet around here, lately."

Another shadow came to the tent door. "Hello, is it safe to enter?"

"Come in, Elias." Susan laughed, "I'm unarmed."

Elias entered and gave me a big smile. "It is good to see you well." he said. Then after a hesitation, "My friend."

"Now that wasn't so hard to say, was it?" I teased.

Elias smiled and simply nodded.

Then Ramón came up close to stand next to me. He nodded at the scar on my chest.

"Sure, you can touch it." I said.

He reached out and gently touched the long scar. It didn't hurt. Much.

He then opened the buttons on his shirt, revealing his own scar. I

understood. I reached out and touched it.

Ramón smiled at me. We were brothers now.

Then we both looked at Elias. He coughed, sniffed, and suddenly excused himself.

The days went by quickly, as I was able to start moving around, fairly well.

On our last evening there, I walked over to Elias, sitting alone by the fire after dinner. "Did I ever say 'thanks'?"

"You just did."

I smiled. "Elias?" I asked, seriously.

"Yes?"

"Can I ask you something?"

"Certainly."

"Are you God?"

He smiled at me, then chuckled. "No, Ben Davison. I am not God."

I thought to myself for a couple of moments ... "Okay, so then if you're not God, does this mean that you're gonna get in trouble for what you did? Susan said the demon said something..."

Elias began chuckling. "It will not be the first time." Then he rose to his feet and continued chuckling as he walked away.

\*\*\* \*\*

Finally it was the day of departure, and we were all more than a little sad to say goodbye to the campsite, and to each other. We took our final ride in the taxi shuttle, which dropped us all off at the bus station. It was very difficult to say farewell to Monica and Ramón - and especially, Elias.

"Will I ever see you again?" I asked.

"You already have."

"Nice response."

"I do my best."

Then Susan ran over and began hugging him. Then I joined her. Then Stuart and Zagnut joined in the fun.

"Oh, Elias, thank you so much for everything!" Susan sniggled. "We love you so much!! We will never be able to repay you."

After we all finally let go, Elias smiled at Susan. "Oh, you already have, my dear. More than you know."

As they turned to leave, I said, "One more thing."

They turned back around, and I handed Elias the \$500 that he had sent us - that we had never used. "Please tell Monica and Ramón that we've talked about it, and that we wanted them to have this. As a wedding present."

Elias quietly looked at us for a moment. "You and your friends have indeed proven to be more than remarkable. Now I am sure I have not seen the like."

## Chapter 59

It is the day of our wedding!

The night before, they gave me my bachelor party. It was all eight of us ... four fathers and four teens, including my brother, David. It was definitely a man's night out, if you know what I mean. Seriously. For real men only.

We started out by going go-kart racing, then we hit the arcades and the pizza place. We ended up at the hardware store for some major belt sander competition - which had by now become one of our favorite pastimes.

Oh, and in case you were wondering? The hardware store was now officially a smoke-free zone. Susan's father had finally quit smoking by Christmas!

The last time we got married, it was up north at a tiny wedding chapel near the university that we were attending. The families had all driven up and, while it was nice, it was really a quick and brief event. Susan had just rented her dress.

This time, we wanted to do something we would always remember. It was to be a traditional church wedding, followed by a reception at our favorite Italian restaurant.

I wasn't permitted to see Susan at all beforehand, but I began to receive scattered reports that I had better prepare myself.

I remembered being a little nervous the last time. But this was something else entirely, as I was literally shaking.

It was about a half hour before the ceremony, and all the men were sequestered in a side waiting room, trying to calm me down, when the door opened.

Standing in the doorway was a tall man in a dark brown cloak. He had long white hair, and carried a staff.

"Elias! You made it!!" I shouted with joy.

The three of us ran over to him and hugged him.

"Ben Davison." he laughed. "Surely you knew I would not miss this day."

"So, is this your history teacher that we keep hearing so much about?" asked my father, as he walked over to shake his hand. "Arthur. The name's Arthur."

"So I understand." Elias winked.

My father raised his eyebrow.

Next, Susan's father came walking over. "Well, you sure look like you're one who can keep your students in line, mister..." he said, extending his hand.

"Elias. I just have my ... students ... call me Elias."

"Pleased to meet you, Elias." they said greeting him.

"Well, I must say these three have certainly proved ... challenging." Elias chuckled.

"Wait until you hear about their latest little adventure." my dad said, sarcastically.

"Perhaps after the wedding. I merely wished to take a moment to offer greetings to the groom."

"So ... history teacher, huh? I must say, you certainly seem to take your job seriously ... what with ... that getup and all." said Susan's father, pointing at his long cloak. He was more than a little concerned about his unusual and intimidating appearance and attire - being his daughter's wedding and all.

Elias smiled at him.

"Can I ... uh ... take your ... staff?"

Elias shrugged and handed it him. "Perhaps that would be best. I would not wish to alarm your guests."

"No, no chance of that happening."

Stuart and Zagnut started snickering.

"I was wondering, Ben Davison, if I might have a word with you, in private?"

"Sure, Elias! What's up?"

We stepped over to the corner of the room.

"I wished to speak to you of the matter concerning your wedding present."

"Are you kidding me!? Elias, you don't have to..."

Elias held his hand up and smiled. "Do you recall your little ... incident ... of late?"

I snorted. "You mean, do I remember that I died? Surely you jest."

Elias smiled. "I must confess something to you."

"Confess something? To me!?" I asked in surprise.

"I am afraid that, while I was..." he gestured towards my chest.

"Yeah ... okay ... go on..." I said, suspiciously.

"I took it upon myself to patch up a couple of other things. While I was in the neighborhood, so to speak."

"What? Patch up!? Like what!? What things!?"

"You shall see, my friend." Elias laughed again. "You shall see." Elias continued chuckling as he headed towards the door. "Well, Ben Davison, I shall take my leave. I wish to also offer greetings to your bride. I shall see you after the wedding." Elias smiled again, then bowed to us and turned to leave the room.

Then he looked back at me once more with a grin. "Oh, and do not forget to bend your knees."

"WHAT!!?"

And with that he left the room.

Susan's dad started to yell after him. "Say, Mr. Elias? You might want to ... uh ... oh, never mind."

\*\*\* \*\*

Susan was surrounded by all four mothers who were making a tremendous fuss over her. Standing atop a small platform, they had been struggling all morning trying to work out all the problems in the long train and veil, but meeting with little success. For such things did not always go well on brides of smaller stature.

Nevertheless, she looked every bit like a queen, surrounded by her court

of fawning servants. And she was loving every minute of it.

She was looking at herself in the huge mirror, when she saw the reflection of a tall shadow appear in the doorway behind her.

Much to the chagrin of her court, she flew out of their hands towards the door, squealing in delight.

Without a word of greeting, she grabbed hold of Elias and held him tightly. Elias had to grab the door to keep himself from falling.

"I'm so glad you're here."

Of course the four mothers had no idea who this strange and foreboding man was, so they weren't about to get too close to him. Susan obviously knew him and that was good enough for them.

Elias finally managed to pry her off. "Now step back, please, and let me see."

Susan smiled and began slowly turning around for him.

"My, my, my." Elias said, as he shook his head. "You are a vision beyond words, my dear. More beautiful than the sunrise."

For the first time today, Susan's eyes began to glisten. "Thank you, Elias. I love you."

"I love you too, my dear."

Elias continued to nod his head approvingly.

The four mothers continued to keep their distance.

"May I?" he asked, looking at her dress.

Susan had no idea what he meant. "Sure."

Elias smiled and then gently touched the back side of her dress. Then he stepped back and faced her, smiling. "I have just spoken with Ben."

"Really!? How is he!? How does he look?"

"You will approve, my dear. Although, he seems to be having some difficulty keeping his wits about him."

"Ahh ... is he really nervous?" she asked concerned.

"I would be more concerned for when he sees you, my dear. He shall most likely require aid to remain standing."

Susan smiled. "Thank you, Elias. Will I see you after the wedding?"

"It is part of your celebration, is it not?"

Susan laughed and turned towards her mother. "Mom, I'm really sorry, but could you do something for me?"

"Sure, sweetie."

"Can you call the restaurant and have them add one more place setting? Make it a guest of honor. Oh, and one more thing ... make sure he gets the bacon-wrapped fillet. With extra bacon."

Elias chuckled. "I do not wish to be a burden."

Susan hugged him again. "Don't you start with me."

Elias laughed. "Well, I shall leave you to your attendants. Ladies?" he said, bowing to them.

They nodded at him, as he turned and left the room.

Then as they approached Susan, they gasped in astonishment. For every wrinkle, kink and fold was miraculously laid flawless in her troublesome dress, including the train and the veil. Every single aspect of the beautiful dress was now absolutely perfect.

\*\*\* \*\*

It was a beautiful wedding. Even Stuart and Zagnut behaved themselves, for a change. Because it was for Susan.

It was a most unusual wedding party. The four mothers were bridesmaids. The four fathers were groomsmen. Stuart, Zagnut and David were ushers, who after seating the guests, would also come up and join with the wedding party.

There was a surprisingly large turnout of many family members, aunts and uncles and cousins, neighbors, and friends from school.

And one teacher.

Ben waited patiently up front with the men, while everyone was seated. He was having a hard time trying to remember everything that he was



supposed to do.

But he did remember to keep his knees bent.

When it was time, Stuart, Zagnut and David also came up front to join them.

Then the procession started as the bridesmaids began coming down the aisle. He was amazed when he saw his mother. "Dad, look at Mom! She's beautiful!"

"That she is, son."

Ben actually began to relax during the procession. He thought it was very cool to see them all dressed up like that, and it helped to take his mind off of things. And the music was so peaceful and soothing.

Suddenly, like a bolt of lightning ripping through his body, the tremendous thundering of the organ sounded the arrival of the bride.

Nobody had prepared him for that heart-stopping moment.

Nor was he at all prepared for the next moment.

An angel had just stepped into the aisle. Dressed completely in pure white, she was the most beautiful creature that he had ever seen.

Once more his world went into slow motion and they both looked at each other across the distance. It was a miracle that Susan made it the entire way without incident, for she never once took her eyes off of Ben.

Susan's father stepped forward and gave her a kiss, then happily gave her hand to Ben, just as he had promised many months ago.

Still never taking their eyes off of each other, they managed to make it through their vows.

Then when the moment came, Ben lifted her veil and kissed her. And to the absolute delight of the audience, it lasted for a very ... long ... time.

## ~ Epilogue ~

*Thirty four years later*

The specter peered down at the cabin deep in the canyon. The cabin sat alongside a full-running creek, completely surrounded by a patch of trees and brush. A dwindling thread of smoke coming from the chimney indicated the fireplace inside had all but gone out..

As he made his way down towards his objective, he passed by a large fire pit, nearly a hundred yards from the cabin.

Also nearby were a generator, several drums of fuel, a propane tank, and a well. In the adjacent carport next to the cabin there was a Jeep.

Being this close to the cabin, the specter now heard voices coming from inside. Approaching the window, he saw a television playing softly in the corner. And if he wasn't mistaken, it was Jimmy Stewart in "It's a Wonderful Life".

*Somebody has a sense of humor. No, the irony is not lost on me. Very funny.*

Lowering his hood, he rapped on the door three times and waited.

"Well it's about time!" I said, as I opened the door.

"My apologies, Ben Davison. I was ... delayed."

"Come in! Come in!"

As Elias stepped into the cabin, he remarked as to how much larger it was. I had done a lot of remodeling since I bought the place ten years ago as a vacation home ... from the same guy!

"Are you alone?"

"Yeah."

"You are!?"

"Everyone else is down by the river, making smores. I was waiting for you. Come on, they can't wait to see you!"

"This brings back memories, my friend."

"Indeed!"

Elias chuckled. "Nice touch." he said, nodding towards the TV.

"Second time through, tonight."

Elias continued chuckling as we walked down to the river.

"ELIAS!!!" shouted a group of people, at once. Susan leaped up and grabbed him, hugging him tightly.

Everyone was there. Zagnut and his family, Stuart and his family, Monica and Ramón and their family. And our other friends as well. It is another joyful reunion.

Oh, and our family! Susan and I now have five grandchildren, with more on the way! When Elias said he patched up a couple things ... well let's just say he was thorough.

It's late November, Thanksgiving weekend.

In case you were wondering, five months ago we celebrated our 32nd or 65th wedding anniversary! Depending on how you want to look at it.

"Eeeeeeeek!!! Get it away from me, you dork!!!" Susan was screaming at Zagnut for dangling a small gopher snake in front of her. "Come back here! If I EVER catch you..."

Some things never change.

Later that evening and after everyone had gone to bed, Susan and I managed to sneak away from the large group. There was something I wanted to show her.

"What!? What is it?"

"You'll see - just wait."

"Why are you being so secretive? Why, Mr. Davison! I certainly hope you have honorable intentions. Out here ... with nobody around ... with these blankets ... all by ourselves..."

"I assure you, Mrs. Davison. When the time comes, I have no intention of being honorable with you."

"Mr. Davison!!!"

"Okay, we can stop here. We should have a good view from this spot. It should be here, any minute."

"What, Ben? What is it already!?"

"There! Right up there; do you see it?"

"What!?"

"Draconis. The light has taken 34 years to get here. And it has finally arrived."

"Oh, Ben!!"

And the kissing started.

"Indeed it has."

We immediately stopped, realizing we were not alone. For there was someone standing not five feet away.

He was tall with long white hair, wearing a dark brown cloak, and carrying a staff.

Except that this time, he was not alone.

"Elias!!" we both exclaimed. "What ... who..."

But that's another story . . .

## *Notes to the reader ...*

### **1) Regarding Ion Victor Atonescu**

All true. Except he probably was actually executed. Probably. June 15, 1882 - June 1, 1946

### **2) Regarding Dehomag, IBM & Nazi/Holocaust connections**

All true. Look it up.

### **3) Regarding the Intel fabrication plant**

All true. I used to work as a Systems Engineer at one.

### **4) Regarding Oaxacan Indians and slave camps**

All true.

I have personally visited the slave camps several times. There were two young kids in particular that I befriended, often taking them for rides in my Jeep. Their names were Monica and Ramón.

A situation far worse than anything going on in the Middle East. Perhaps someday our government will take an interest in helping free them, even though there is no oil.

### **5) Regarding racing belt sanders**

Yeah, that tracking really is the hardest part.

### **6) Regarding both the bike off the cliff and the car of the cliff incidents?**

Yup. Even the news helicopter. 'Nuf said.

### **7) Regarding Elias**

Nah ... maybe next time.

Oh, and it's pronounced E-li-as [ee-lye-uhs].

## ***Footnotes***

[1] "Jaws" (1975)

[2] The Way We Were (1973)

[3] Magnum Force (1973)

[4] The Exorcist (1973)

[5] The Lord of the Rings (published 1954-55). J. R. R. Tolkien.

[6] The Princess Bride (1987)

# Preview of Book Two: AWAKENING

Dreams.

What is real and what isn't? And what would you do if you found out your life never really happened?

Find out in this haunting and beautiful story, as the companions return for another adventure full of wonder and surprise. Along with a new evil and the introduction of some fascinating new characters, return once again to the world of the Second Chance.

*From the author . . .*

Of all the stories planned for this series, I have always known "Awakening" would be and always will be my personal favorite. Not for any reasons personal. I just like the story.

Ever since I was a very small child, I have always loved a good story. I remember saving up my lunch money all year in third grade, so that when the book club order form came out each month, I could buy more books than my limited budget of three. I was a skinny kid.

I will never forget all those years where I would stay up well past my bedtime, hiding beneath my covers with a flashlight and enjoying the wonders of new worlds and characters and all of their amazing adventures.

I have missed those years. More specifically, I have missed that sense of wonder, as few books these days seem to contain that special ingredient for me.

Therefore, it is my greatest hope that as you read my stories in this series, that regardless of your age, you too may enjoy that which I hold most dear in the reading of a good book.

Wonder.

~ The Dream ~

Chapter 1

Alana had led a very unusual life. At sixty years old, there had been many strange and unexplainable events that to this day still puzzled her. But they all paled in comparison to the strange specter who would visit her on occasion.

Alana lived in a nice ranch house that her husband, Michael, had built for her over forty years ago. Together they had raised three wonderful children, and were now helping to raise eight grandchildren.

Michael had been a wonderful husband. They lived on their family ranch land, on the Kohala Coast of the Big Island of Hawaii. The land had been in the family for two generations. Michael had been a rancher for all of his entire adult life. They still enjoyed living in the country, with pine trees and grass prairies, nestled against the immense slopes of Mauna Kea.

Alana was born and raised in Hawaii. Her mother, Kiyoko, was from Okinawa, Japan and had met her American father, Frank Dawson, during the war. They married and returned to Pearl Harbor where he was based. After his tour of duty ended, they moved to the Big Island, where he fulfilled his dream of raising horses.

Born soon after they moved to the ranch, her father had named her Alana, which was Hawaiian for 'Awakening'. For with the birth of their first child, Frank believed he had finally awoken from the nightmarish horrors of World War II and had begun his life anew.

Alana had first met her husband when she was only seventeen years old. Being a local girl, she rarely ran into a 'haole', as American mainlanders never ventured far from the touristy beaches and volcanoes on the Big Island. Thus she was surprised to see a strange young man limping along the small dirt road towards her home.

She mounted her horse and rode out to warn the intruder that he was trespassing on private property. As she drew closer, she noticed he wasn't much older than she was. She approached him cautiously, as she remained on her horse. He looked up at her and smiled, then toppled over unconscious.

Shocked, Alana had no idea what to do. She wasn't exactly accustomed to boys passing out in front of her, so she left him on the ground and rode off to fetch her father.

When he woke up, the first thing he saw were the most beautiful dark eyes he had ever seen. It was the girl on the horse. He found himself lying in someone's bedroom, having no idea where he was.

"You're my angel!" he said groggily.



"No, she's my daughter, haole. And you have no business being here."

He looked over at the girl's mother. "I'm sorry, I really am. I just didn't know where else to go."

"What brings you out here, boy?" said a man, who was probably the girl's father.

"I ... I was hiking with some friends and we got split up. So I thought I could just walk back to where we were staying. I didn't know I'd end up out here in the middle of nowhere."

"Where are you staying?" asked the man.

"Kona Coast".

"That's twenty five miles away! And it's almost dark!" the father said.

"Yeah, I guess they don't call this the Big Island for nothing, huh?" he said, grinning sheepishly.

"Fool haoles." grumbled the mother on her way out of the room.

"What's your name, boy? Where are you staying? I'll call your parents and have them come pick you up."

"Uh, Michael. Michael Swan. We're staying at the Hilton."

The father left the room without saying a word.

"Don't mind them." The girl said politely. "We're just not used to strangers."

*Even her voice sounds angelic!*

"What's your name?"

"Alana."

"Thank you, Alana."

She nodded politely.

"So ... how long have I been out?"

"About two hours. You seemed exhausted."

"Well, I had already been hiking since early this morning. I guess I was more tired than I thought."

She nodded again and then left quietly.

*Everybody's leaving me! What the heck!?*

He started to sit up, when her mother came in with a tray of food. She shook her head at him. "Eat first."

He ate alone.

After he finished, her father came in. "I managed to get a hold of your parents. They were quite worried about you - they'd already called the police. They'll be here soon."

He started to say 'thank you', but the man immediately turned and walked out of the room.

*Geez, where's the Aloha spirit!?*

Then Alana brought in some towels. "You can wash up in there." she said pointing. Then she turned to leave.

"Wait! Don't leave! Please?"

She stopped, and then turned towards him. She had long, straight, jet black hair which reached all the way to her waist. It was so black, it seemed almost blue. She was part Caucasian and part Asian. And she was quite simply the most beautiful girl Michael had ever seen. All he could think about, was that he might never see her again.

"Please! I ... I don't know what to say ... but ..."

"But what?" she asked.

"I don't want to say goodbye!" It was all he could think of to say.

She looked at him for a moment. Then she did the most amazing thing. She smiled.

"Be right back." she said as she left. She returned with a piece of paper, which she stuffed in his shirt pocket. Then without saying a word, she left.

Michael slowly and achingly got up and went to the washroom, and after he closed the door, he quickly pulled out the piece of paper. On it she had

written the name of her school, and what time she got out.

\*\*\* \*\*

Now at sixty years old, Alana Swan was a much older woman. She had lived a good life, with a kind and loving husband.

But there had been many things about her life that didn't seem quite right. Strange visions. Strange people. Strange dreams.

Among those strange dreams had been a recurring one. And it was this particular dream that had always frightened Alana; for she dreamed she was in a hospital bed, possibly her deathbed. Sometimes she would see a strange, lone woman sitting in the corner ... too far away to make out her features. And try as she might, Alana could never get the woman to respond.

But the strangest thing of all, was the visitor. He would always appear the very next day after she had the dream.

Alana was sitting in her rocking chair on her porch, looking down the small dirt road heading out of the ranch. She was expecting to see her visitor again. For she had once again had the dream last night.

## Chapter 2

Michael Swan had never married. And now he was dying. At only 62 years of age, he had at best two weeks to live. Not that he was all that surprised. He knew those cigarettes would kill him eventually. Nor did he care all that much. He really didn't have any reason to stick around anyway.

A renowned and successful business man, he had been the former head of the Strategic Defense Initiative Organization black project under Ronald Reagan. Though publicly 'Star Wars' had ended in failure, unbeknownst to the public it had continued privately under his leadership and oversight. And succeeded.

Now the current sitting president had begun using it as a secret global threat to bring other world powers under America's watchful control, extending U.S. 'democracy' to the entire world. Of course, only a handful of politicians and military personnel knew anything about it. And himself, of course ... for this had all been his planning and strategy from the beginning.

So far, the other world leaders had kept fearfully quiet, as the targeted lasers held each of them and their families in their sights.

Michael had always been good at control and manipulation. He knew how

to take advantage of the right situation and the right people at the right time. Never one to leave things to fate, he was a 'take charge' kind of guy who had made his own way.

President Kale Onakea had been his best friend in college. He was the first Hawaiian U.S. president, and now the most powerful man in the world.

At least that was the public conception. For little did they suspect, the true person of global power was lying here, incapacitated in a bed, and dying of cancer.

Michael had no regrets. Had he to do it all over again, he couldn't think of a single thing he would change. Not even the cigarettes.

He had made his choices. He had lived by them. And now he would die by them. At least they were all his choices.

*Not like when ...*

He didn't want to think about it. He hated when that haunting memory from his youth came to him, as it so often did. But as he learned to do long ago, he could lock those thoughts away, compartmentalized where they couldn't bother him for a time.

*Maybe this would be the last time.*

"Mr. Swan? Sir, you have a visitor." said his private nurse from the doorway, interrupting his thoughts.

"I told you I don't want any visitors."

"You told me you didn't want to see anyone from the government or military. I don't think this visitor is from either."

"What, is it some priest, come to give me my last rights!? Send him away!"

"No, sir, I ... don't think he's a priest."

"Well who then!? Out with it!!"

"Well ... I ..."

"Oh for crying out loud! Spit it out, girl!"

"Uh ... here he is now ... sir ..."

The nurse then backed away from the doorway. And into the doorway stepped a tall man in a dark brown cloak. He had long white hair, and carried a staff.

"Who is it!? Who are you?"

"Michael Swan, I presume?"

"Yeah, yeah, what is it? What do you want!?"

"May I come in?"

"Okay yeah sure, but be quick about it. As you can see, I'm a very busy man!" Michael said, sarcastically.

Michael's eyes widened as the visitor entered.



For the presence that stood there, was not a man. At least not in the normal sense of the word. His face looked ancient. Not in an elderly sense, for his face seemed younger than his. But his eyes...it was as if ages had passed before them. He had long white hair, and stood straight and tall. He carried a long staff in his right hand. Whatever the staff was for used for, Michael didn't think he needed it to walk.

"Who ... or what in blazes ... are you supposed to be?"

"Michael Swan, it is a pleasure to meet you."

"Look, whatever this is, can we just skip the pleasantries and get on with it?"

"As you wish, Michael Swan. Mind if I have a seat, first?"

"Help yourself."

As the stranger was sitting down, Michael was quickly growing more impatient. "So what's this all about? It's getting late and I don't have many more 'lates' left."

Elias smiled.

"You think this is funny!?" said Michael angrily.

"You seem to have a sharp tongue and a short fuse, Michael Swan."

"You wanna see how short!!? Nurse!" Michael yelled.

"Please, Michael Swan, I mean no offense. I will get right to the point, as you have requested."

Michael looked at him, waiting.

"Let me start by introducing myself. I am called Elias. And I have come to offer you a proposition that I think you will find most interesting."

Even in his final days, Michael was still a businessman at heart. "Go on." he replied, after the stranger paused.

"I think you should know up front, Michael Swan, that I know a great deal about you."

Now, Michael Swan was not a person who could normally be taken by surprise. But for once, he was stunned to hear this complete stranger spend the next hour recounting Michael's entire life - from his birth to his last days here in the hospital.

When Elias finished, Michael was speechless. Sure, some of what he had done were public record; but most of the things Elias mentioned were very much private.

"You're very good, I'll give you that."

"I am sorry? Very good?"

"Look, I know a shakedown when I see one. You've obviously done extensive research on me and ..."

"I assure you ..."

"... whatever it is you think you can get from me, I'll tell you right now. I don't care. I don't care about anything or any-body. I don't care about my reputation or my legacy. Obviously I don't care about my life. So whatever it is you think you've got on me, let me tell you what you can..."

"Alana is alive."

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## *About the Author . . .*



Paul Green is a freelance writer, author, and has been an independent computer consultant for more than 30 years.

After having spent a lifetime imagining wondrous and fantastical stories and adventures, he has finally found the time to begin creating the wonderful worlds from his imaginings.

*"Why didn't I start writing sooner? Though strongly and repeatedly advised by my college professors, I was too insecure to think I could actually make a living writing stories. I mean, what kind of ridiculous pipedream is that? Now having completed my first trilogy and seeing the wonderful and unexpected response, I have begun to regret that decision. (sigh) Looks like I have a lot of lost time to make up for. Hmmm ... if only I had a Second Chance ..."*

Paul is 53 years old and lives with his wife and son in Southern California.